CANADIAN THESES ON MICROFICHE

THÈSES CANADIENNES SUR MICROFICHE

National Library of Canada
Collections Development Branch

Canadian Theses on
Microfiche Service

Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada
Direction du développement des collections

Service des thèses canadiennes
sur microfiche

NOTICE

The quality of this microfiche is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

Previously copyrighted materials (journal articles, published tests, etc.) are not filmed.

Reproduction in full or in part of this film is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30. Please read the authorization forms which accompany this thesis.

AVIS

La qualité de cette microfiche dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

Les documents qui font déjà l'objet d'un droit d'auteur (articles de revue, examens publiés, etc.) ne sont pas microfilmés.

La reproduction, même partielle, de ce microfilm est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30. Veuillez prendre connaissance des formules d'autorisation qui accompagnent cette thèse.

THIS DISSERTATION
HAS BEEN MICROFILMED
EXACTLY AS RECEIVED

LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
MICROFILMÉE TELLE QUE
NOUS L'AVONS REÇUE

Canada

NL 339 (r. 86/06)

National Library of Canada / Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0N4

126

TC –

ISBN 0-315-21320-5

CANADIAN THESES ON MICROFICHE SERVICE – SERVICE DES THÈSES CANADIENNES SUR MICROFICHE

PERMISION TO MICROFILM – AUTORISATION DE MICROFILMER

• Please print or type – Écrire en lettres moulées ou dactylographier

AUTHOR – AUTEUR

Full Name of Author – Nom complet de l'auteur

KIRSTEN ANN SHARP

Date of Birth – Date de naissance	Canadian Citizen – Citoyen canadien
29/04/58	☐ Yes / Oui ☒ No / Non
Country of Birth – Lieu de naissance	**Permanent Address – Résidence fixe**
UNITED KINGDOM	73 GORING ROAD GORING-BY-SEA W. SUSSEX BN12 4AY UK.

THESIS – THÈSE

Title of Thesis – Titre de la thèse

THE REFLECTION OF THE "HÁVAMÁL" CONCEPT OF WISDOM IN THE ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR

Degree for which thesis was presented Grade pour lequel cette thèse fut présentée	Year this degree conferred Année d'obtention de ce grade
MA	1985
University – Université	**Name of Supervisor – Nom du directeur de thèse**
UNIV OF ALBERTA	DR C. HALE

AUTHORIZATION – AUTORISATION

Permission is hereby granted to the NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CANADA to **microfilm** this thesis and to **lend** or **sell copies of the film.**

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither the thesis nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's written permission.

L'autorisation est, par la présente, accordée à la BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DU CANADA de **microfilmer** cette thèse et de **prêter** ou de **vendre des exemplaires du film.**

L'auteur se réserve les autres droits de publication; ni la thèse ni de longs extraits de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans l'autorisation écrite de l'auteur.

ATTACH FORM TO THESIS – VEUILLEZ JOINDRE CE FORMULAIRE À LA THÈSE

Signature	Date
Kirsten Sharp	29th March 1985

NL-91 (r. 84/03)

Canada

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

The Reflection of the "Hávamál" Concept of Wisdom in the *Islendingasögur*

by

Kirsten Sharp

(C)

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF Master of Arts

IN

Germanic Languages

Department of Germanic Languages

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

Spring 1985

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

RELEASE FORM

NAME OF AUTHOR Kirsten Sharp

TITLE OF THESIS The Reflection of the "Hávamál" Concept of Wisdom in the *Islendingasögur*

DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS WAS PRESENTED Master of Arts

YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED Spring 1985

Permission is hereby granted to THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA LIBRARY to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific research purposes only.

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither the thesis nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's written permission.

(SIGNED) Kirsten Sharp

PERMANENT ADDRESS:

73 Goring Road
Goring-by-Sea
West Sussex

DATED 29th March 1985

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled The Reflection of the "Hávamál" Concept of Wisdom in the *Islendingasögur* submitted by Kirsten Sharp in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Germanic Languages.

Christopher S. Hale
.....
Supervisor

Richard d'Alquen
.....

Raymond J. Grant
.....

Date March 13, 1985

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, selected characters renowned for their wisdom in the *Íslendingasögur* are examined to see how far standards laid down in the "Hávamál" were reflected in the medieval Scandinavian society portrayed in the sagas.

The first chapter looks at the figure of Snorri Goði in Eyrbyggja Saga, Laxdœla Saga and Njáls Saga, and finds that his actions are consistent with those recommended by the "Hávamál" in the following respects. He is moderate and cautious, realizing that by relying on his wisdom he can avoid the risks of violent confrontation. By being generous and liberal with good advice, Snorri secures his position by making friends. In these ways, Snorri, seeking primarily to serve himself, manages to play an important and beneficial role in society.

Chapter two is about the family of Kveld-Úlf in Egils Saga. Its handsome heroes have a meteoric rise to glory in the service of kings, while its ugly family members like Egil prove unsuited to courtly life, and fare best at home. As the "Hávamál" says, however, wealth and power are the ficklest of friends, and the two heroic Þórólfs soon lose their lives. Their loathly kinsmen, on the other hand, achieve a more secure kind of greatness because they posess the attributes of the "Hávamál" "fróðr maðr", a type often contrasted with the heroic type in the *Íslendingasögur*.

The third chapter concerns Njál, a character caught between the ethics of the "Hávamál" (e.g., cunning and deceit) and Christianity (e.g., turning the other cheek). Njál's wise reputation is partly due to his prescience, but this is a poor substitute for the insight of the true "fróðr maðr" characterized in the "Hávamál", which also points out that the man who cannot see his fate in advance is freest from sorrow.

Chapter four examines two wise characters from Laxdœla Saga, Gest Oddleifsson and Óláf pá. The former is, like Njál, burdened with prescience. Óláf is, like the other wise men discussed, hospitable, cautious, shrewd, reserved in his use of force, moderate in all things but his aversion to conflict: in his public life, this serves the function of settling potentially serious disputes, but is taken too far in his private life. By not observing the "Hávamál" spirit that even good things have the potential for harm if taken to extremes, Óláf helps to steer his loved ones toward tragedy.

Table of Contents

Chapter		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	SNORRI GODI	15
III.	KVELD-ÚLF AND HIS DESCENDANTS	38
IV.	NJÁL	61
V.	GEST ODDLEIFSSON AND ÓLÁF PÁ	80
VI.	CONCLUSION	96
BIBLIOGRAPHY		106
INDEX		108

I. INTRODUCTION

To the civilisations of the world come first literacy and the desire to keep records, and then literature and the recording of the civilisation's artistic, moral and spiritual tenets. In the desire to record the accumulative practical experience of the group, poetry puts onto the lips of the shaman or priest-king figure lists of proverbial gems. Williams' points out that "Egyptian literature abounds in 'rules for wise conduct and good manners'", that Greek gnomists like Hesiod wrote hundreds of years before the Christian era, and that Hebrew scriptures contain many homeletic and sententious passages. Germanic literature was no exception:

> "Wisdom-Poetry of this kind was of course known to the Anglo-Saxons through the Scriptures...but it is very probable that the Anglo-Saxons, like the Celtic people on their western frontiers and their Germanic kindred in Scandinavia inherited an independent and ancient tradition of gnomic formulations such as occur in the earlier stages of world literature."[2]

Wisdom-poetry is an unfamiliar genre in the modern world, although its existence "in its day (as) a large and successful literary category"[3] is widely recognized by scholars. In his study of surviving Old English verse, T. A. Shippey characterizes the genre by its functions, namely, offering advice or describing the process of acquiring

---

[1]Blanche Colton Williams, Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914), pp. 8-9.
[2]S. A. J. Bradley, trans. and ed., Anglo-Saxon Poetry (London: Dent, 1982), p. 344.
[3]T. A. Shippey, Old English Verse (London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1972), p. 67.

wisdom.

At its most basic level, Germanic wisdom poetry is simply a list of gnomes or maxims, small pieces of traditional knowledge which, when put together, spell out the limits of the self-awareness of the comitatus. Sometimes appearing enigmatic and fragmented, these statements must be put together by the listener in active conspiracy with the poet. Examples of this type of poetry are the Old English "Maxims II" from MS Cotton Tiberius B.i, and "Maxims I" from The Exeter Book:

> Forst sceal freosan,....fyr wudu meltan,
> eorþe grown,.....is brycgian,
> wæter helm wegan,.....wundrum lucan
> eorþan ciþas..."[4]
>
> ("Frost must needs freeze, fire crumble wood, earth burgeon, ice build bridges - and the water support a canopy - and miraculously lock away earth's seeds...")[5]

This type of passage, simply defining the empirically observed qualities of familiar things (frequently of women, for example), is also represented in the Old Norse Eddic poem the "Hávamál":

> 82. "...Á skip skal skriðar orka,
> en á skiǫld til hlífar,
> mæki hǫggs,
> en mey til kossa."[6]
>
> ("...From the ship is speed to be expected, but

---

[4] "Maxims I", ll. 71-74. From The Exeter Book, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 159.
[5] S. A. J. Bradley, trans. and ed. Anglo-Saxon Poetry (London: Dent, 1982), p. 348.
[6] "Hávamál", Stanza 82. All "Hávamál" quotations are from Helgason's edition: Jón Helgason, Eddadigte (København: Munksgaard, 1962), I.

a shield (is) for help, and a maiden for kisses."[1])

On a more elevated level, these short gnomic statements are tied to the mystery of knowledge itself, i.e., to runes. We see this in the "Rúnatal" section of the "Hávamál" and in the Old English poem "Solomon and Saturn", in which the runic meanings of the letters in the word 'paternoster' are given.

Another interesting situation occurs when gnomes are irreconcilable and contradictory. The limits of the knowledge of the comitatus have then been reached. Thus we see that wisdom is not simply a matter of knowledge, but also one of the intelligence to interpret and judge when to apply which maxim:

> "Frige mec frodum wordum!....Ne læt þinne ferð onhælne,
> degol þæt þu deopost cunne!....Nelle ic þe min dyrne gesecgan,
> gif þu me þinne hygecræft hylest.... ond þine heortan geþohtas.
> Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan."[2]
>
> ("Sound me out with shrewd words. Let your own intellect not be hidden, nor that of which you have deepest understanding be kept secret. I will not speak my mystery to you if you hide from me the faculty of your reason and the reflections of your heart. Discerning people must exchange maxims."[3])

In the "Hávamál", too, the listener is expected to actively apply his own good judgement rather than simply heed the advice offered, and a distinction is made between those who have this ability, the "fróðir menn", and those who do not.

---

[1]All translations from Old Icelandic (and German) are my own.
[2]"Maxims I", ll. 99-94, The Exeter Book, pp. 156-157.
[3]Anglo-Saxon Poetry, pp. 345-346.

Then there is the type of poem usually called "elegy", in which the poet seeks to work out the apparent contradiction between Christian and pagan gnomes. Such a poem is the Old English "The Wanderer", in which the "anhaga" tries to reconcile the Christian idea of God's mercy and the idea that Wyrd, or fate, is fixed:

> "Oft him anhaga.....are gebideð,
> metudes miltse,.....þeah þe he modcearig
> geond lagulade.....longe sceolde
> hreran mid hondum.....hrimcealde sæ,
> wadan wræclastas.....Wyrd bið ful aræd!"[10]
>
> ("Often the man on his own experiences grace, the mercy of the ordaining Lord - even though for a long time, anxious of mind, he has to row laboriously upon the ice-cold sea over the watery way, to travel the paths of exile: fate is inexorable!"[11])

Gnomic poetry can also shade into proverbs, which are more personal and less universal. These are represented in Old English by "The Proverbs of Alfred" and "The Durham Proverbs", and characters in the Old Norse sagas frequently utter proverbial sayings, some of which also occur in Eddic lays, although it is difficult to know which preceded which. Gnomes can also become riddles, where wisdom is put to the specific purpose of testing the knowledge of the listener or reader. There are, for example, 95 of these in The Exeter Book, and riddles also feature in the Old Norse Heiðreks Saga.

Finally, gnomic wisdom is expressed in the Germanic societies' codes of laws, where such pieces of wisdom as are

---

[10] The Exeter Book, p. 134.
[11] Anglo-Saxon Poetry, p. 322.

applicable to everyday manners and morals are collected; consider, for example "The Code of Alfred and Ine", "The Laws of Æthelred", "The Code of Cnut" and "The Institutes of Polity". The Icelandic code of law, recited from memory by the law-speaker at the Alþing in three annual sections doubtless also had its roots in gnomic verse. As we shall see, following the advice in "Hávamál", for example, certainly keeps one on the right side of the law (at least superficially).

Therefore, it is safe to assume a common Germanic taste for "wisdom-poetry" alongside other forms such as the epic, the lay and the lyric. This genre of "wisdom-poetry" covers a wide range of gnomes or maxims, elegies, proverbs, riddles and laws. My particular interest is the Old Norse "Hávamál", which conforms to both of Shippey's criteria of offering advice and describing the process of acquiring wisdom, (see p. 1), and thus fits into this category. More specifically, I shall be concerned with the "Hávamál's" attempt to define the qualities of the "fróðr maðr ("wise man"), and the practical applicability of this type of wisdom in the *Íslendingasögur*.

The "Hávamál", or "Sayings of the High One (i.e., Óðin)", can be divided into the following categories:[12]

---

[12]These categories have been compiled from those devised in: Henry Adams Bellows, trans., The Poetic Edda (London: Oxford University Press, 1926); Lee M. Hollander, trans., The Poetic Edda (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962); Paul B. Taylor and W. H. Auden, trans., The Elder Edda: A Selection (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

Stanzas 1-79; "Ethical verses"

Stanzas 80-90; Miscellaneous

Stanzas 90-103; "Meyapáttr" (section on women)

Stanzas 104-110; "Gunnlaðarþáttr" (Óðin's affair with Gunnlǫð and the acquisition of the mead of poetry)

Stanzas 111-137; "Loddfáfnismál" (separate collection of educational verses, some corresponding to the advice in the first section, addressed to Loddfáfnir)

Stanzas 138-145; "Rúnatal" (rune lore, including a description of Óðin's acquisition of runic wisdom)

Stanzas 146-164; "Ljóðatal" (a list of the spells Óðin knows)

The first section, most likely the original "Hávamál" and probably composed much earlier than the rest (perhaps even in Norway, prior to the settlement of Iceland, although that is where it was finally written down), consists mainly of pieces of advice governing conduct. This section can be further divided according to subject matter: "Hospitality" (including 'rules' for the behaviour of guests); "Friendship"; "Gift-giving"; "Philosophy"; "Wisdom". These categories tend to overlap - friendship with gift-giving, hospitality with friendship, even hospitality with wisdom. The stanzas are not grouped according to these categories, which I have devised purely for my own covenience, nor are they arranged in a flowing and consistent manner; rather they are all separate morsels of advice, some of which seem to contradict others since what might work in one situation

could well prove disastrous in another.

Like the shaman's advice in "Maxims I" (quoted above, p. 3), the ethics in the "Hávamál" are not intended as a substitute for gnomic wisdom, though some hints on how to appear wiser than one actually is are given (for example, by remaining relatively sober and by keeping one's mouth shut, one may temporarily avoid betraying one's stupidity). Nor is the "Hávamál" a set of absolute principles like the Ten Commandments. Rather it sets down several basic facts of life (taking into account that for every rule there are exceptions), points out some major pitfalls (such as getting blind drunk in a hall full of one's worst enemies) and leaves it to the individual to assess his own particular predicament and decide how best to apply these ideas. To do this, one requires a certain amount of insight, which the "Hávamál" cannot impart. Insight is generally an innate quality, though one that improves with age and experience.

The group covering what can loosely be termed as wisdom is much the largest (approximately 40 of the 79 stanzas of the first section, as well as a few throughout the other sections) and in many respects the most important, "Hávamál" wisdom being a vital, life-preserving quality. It also includes more æsthetic values such as the verbal skills of skaldship, eloquence and legal expertise, although, as we shall see in Chapter II, even poetic talents can save lives. The idea of wisdom is rendered by the following terms: "manvit mikit" (Stanzas 6 & 11); "snotr" (Stanzas 5, 24, 55,

56); "fróðr" (Stanzas 28, 30, 31, 63); "vit", "sá er vitandi er vits" or "mart vito" (Stanzas 18, 9, 54); "ráðsnotr" (Stanza 64); and "horskr" (Stanzas 20 & 63). The wise man is characterised, often in contrast with the fool, the man who is "ósviðr" (Stanzas 21, 23); ósnotr" (Stanzas 24, 25, 26, 27, 80); "dœlskr" (Stanza 57); "afglapi" (Stanza 17); "sá er ekki kann" (Stanza 5).'[1]

Wisdom is not to be confused with mere good sense in practical matters, with which the "Hávamál" also deals, and despite the suggestions as to how to seem somewhat wiser than one is, it is made clear that eventually the truth will emerge and the genuinely wise will distinguish themselves from the average. The wise man knows his limitations (Stanza 64), as well as those of others (133), and is at all times moderate (11, 12) and cautious (1, 7, 38) but not fearful (16, 23, 64, 131). He may reveal his wisdom through his eloquence (28), his intelligent conversation and good advice, but will know when to keep quiet (6, 7), while the fool will either have nothing to say for himself (17, 26) or will babble mindlessly and incessantly (17, 29). A lack of observation, of perception and of judgement (24, 25), and intemperate eating and drinking habits (20, 21, 31, 11, 12, 13, 14) are the marks of a fool.

Because so much weight is given to the question of wisdom in the "Hávamál" I have elected to examine this

---

[1]Stanza numbers refer to those in Helgason's edition of the "Hávamál", in: Jón Helgason, ed. Eddadigte (København: Munksgaard, 1962), I.

concept and to try to determine to what extent these ideas may have been reflected in early Icelandic society.

The *Íslendingasögur* were written between two and three centuries after the events depicted, at a time when alien political interference and civil war were threatening the very survival of the Icelandic Commonwealth; the country was soon to come under foreign rule that would last until 1944. Under these miserable conditions, looking back to the relatively glorious age of settlement would fill the saga writers with a nostalgia that would inevitably tend to romanticise and glamourise the old values of their ancestors and the historical events in which they participated. Some of the earliest sagas to be written have all too obviously come under an inappropriate clerical influence, as the clergy were anxious to obliterate all references to the old pre-Christian values and religion, for example by changing the names of the days of the week because they were named after the Æsir.'[14] The later saga period, however, seems to have been a time of reaction against this heavy censorship, and, as Nordal'[15] points out, Snorri Sturluson's introduction to the Prose Edda evidently refers to a dispute between those who, if only for the purpose of restoring richness and metre to the inferior modern poetry, wished to keep alive the old mythology, and those who wished to quash it

---

'[14]Snorri Sturluson, The Prose Edda, trans. Jean I. Young, with introduction by Sigurður Nordal (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1954), Introduction, p. 11.

'[15]Ibid., p. 12.

altogether. It is considered[11] to have been because of this revival of interest, kindled by Snorri, that the ancient poems of the Elder Edda (which of course includes the "Hávamál") were collected and recorded. Snorri himself quotes numerous stanzas of the mythological Eddic verse, including the opening stanza of the "Hávamál" in his "Gylfaginning".[12]

We can never know how accurately the *Islendingasögur* have recaptured the actual old philosophy partly summarised in the "Hávamál". The centuries that passed between the Saga Age and the time the sagas were written have probably distorted the picture in some way, although it is impossible to say just how much. Furthermore, the individual "authors" may have had some personal bias towards their material which influenced the way they recorded the sagas.[13] The enthusiasm of the revivalist may have made the saga writers project their own nostalgic notions of the old standards onto the characters and events they wrote about. Alternatively, the course of time and changing attitudes may have led to certain aspects of the old outlook being gradually and imperceptibly eroded. Furthermore, despite the renewal of literary interest in the old poetry and religion, the more ostentatiously heathen elements which presumably played some

---

[11] For example, by Nordal, Ibid., p. 13.
[12] Other Eddic quotations used by Snorri are from the "Vǫluspá" (especially), the "Lokasenna", the "Alvíssmál" and the "Hyndluljóð".
[13] The writer of each one of the sagas discussed here has been accused of having an axe to grind, either adhering to or reacting against some trend or another.

part in the lives of the saga characters seem to have been played down, possibly for fear of censorship, or equally possibly through genuine Christian sensibility on the part of the writer. We must simply accept the sagas as they are, as detailed pictures of medieval Scandinavian society, admittedly written some centuries after the composition of the "Hávamál", but nevertheless the nearest we are ever likely to get to a true picture of that society.

I intend to concentrate on four sagas, all of which belong to the later[1] saga periods; Eyrbyggja Saga, Laxdœla Saga and Egils Saga (early classical period, 1235-55) and Njáls Saga (late classical, 1275-1325). I have alluded to the problems of detecting traces of the older values in the earlier sagas, although Fóstbrœdra Saga does include one lone direct quotation from the "Hávamál" (part of Stanza 84). Another reason for chosing the later sagas is that they tend to be of greater length and superior style, with considerably more emphasis on character delineation. The latter aspect is particularly important for my purposes as I propose to see how far (if at all) and in which respects the men[2] deemed wise by the saga writers resemble the wise man as described in the "Hávamál" in character, behaviour and

---

[1] These are Stefán Einarsson's classifications, in his A History of Icelandic Literature (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1957).

[2] Wisdom is not just reserved for men, although all the examples I discuss here happen to be male. There are also examples of wise women in some of the sagas, but as they are neither central nor fully developed characters there is unfortunately insufficient material on them to support an investigation here.

attitude. Thus I hope to determine how far the values of the latter are reflected in and applicable to the *Íslendingasögur*. The men I will be primarily interested in are Snorri goði, Kveld-Úlf and his grandson Egil Skallagrímsson, Njál, Gest Oddleifsson and Óláf pá. These are men regarded as wise by their contemporaries, and therefore if it can be shown that their deeds correspond to the advice in the "Hávamál", then it will also follow that the "Hávamál" standards of wisdom were indeed the standards of wisdom of that society in general.

Those sagas whose central characters are 'heroes', Grettis Saga and Gísla Saga, for example, have been left out here for want of evidence of particularly 'wise' deeds. Indeed, 'heroism' seems to have been in some regards almost the antithesis of wisdom. The underlying idea that pervades all the various stanzas concerning wisdom is self preservation. Advice is given on how to detect potentially hazardous situations and avoid them and on how to recognize the motives of others, and wise men who act in the way prescribed by the "Hávamál" invariably live long and prosperous lives. 'Heroes', on the other hand have some qualities in common with the foolish men described in the "Hávamál"; an inability to recognize their own limitations, a lack of perception, judgement, caution and observation. They are often filled with lofty ideas of nobility and justice and have a naive faith in the similar integrity of others which leads them to court disaster. These unwise

'heroes' are not, on the whole, condemned as fools by the saga writers, and are often lauded for other outstanding talents, but have a strong tendency to meet untimely, brutal and frequently avoidable deaths because of a series of misjudgements on their part. More often than not they are victims of their own idealistic outlook on life, which goes against the more cynical philosophy of the "Hávamál". For example, Þórólf, outstanding son of Kveld-Úlf and brother of the much less exciting Skalla-Grím, believes that merely because his service of King Harald is entirely loyal and efficient[21] he will earn the royal favour. He fails to perceive what his more astute kinsmen seem to know instinctively, that by unwittingly outshining Harald, outdoing his generosity in gift-giving, hospitality etc., he is arousing Harald's suspicions. Þórólf overlooks the warnings of the king's wrath, such as the seizure of his valuable ship and cargo, and is also foolish in ignoring the threat posed by the Hildiríðarsson's slander against him.[22] Gunnar, of Njáls Saga, too, fails to take good counsel from a wise friend or even sensible precautions. He flouts all too blatant threats to his life and is tragically executed for the killings he was unwillingly forced to commit.

Comparison between any of these rather noble creatures and the first character I propose to examine, Snorri goði, should be sufficient to illustrate the striking contrast

---

[21] This, at least is the way he is presented in Egils Saga, Chs. 6-22.

[22] The "Hávamál" expressly points out the consequences of slander in Stanza 118.

between the architypal man of "Hávamál" wisdom and the "hero". The former require at least a certain degree of unscrupulousness and ruthlessness in the outwitting of real or potential foes. They may, on occasion, appear downright immoral by today's standards, but in fact turn out to be conforming closely to the standards of the "Hávamál".

II. SNORRI GOÐI

As the "vitrastr maðr...á Íslandi"[23] ("the wisest man...in Iceland"), Snorri goði is the first and most obvious choice of subject for examination here. He features prominently in a couple of the *Íslendingasögur*, namely Eyrbyggja Saga and Laxdœla Saga, and also appears as a less central figure in other sagas, such as Njáls Saga and Heiðarvíga Saga. Wherever he appears he is consistently depicted almost as the epitome of wisdom:[24]

> "Hann var vitr maðr ok forspár um marga hluti."[25]
>
> ("He was a wise man, with forsight into many things.")

Historically, Snorri managed to live to a relatively ripe old age between the years 963 and 1031, despite an eventful life during which he made many enemies and was involved in several bloody feuds. He was not particularly fearsome physically; Eyrbyggja Saga describes him as:

> "...meðalmaðr á hæð, ok heldr grannligr...þeir váru margir, er eigi áttu meira undir sér fyrir afls sakar ok prófaðrar harðfengi."[26]
>
> ("...medium in height and rather slender...there were many who thought more of their own strength and proven toughness.")

Obviously he could not rely too heavily on his physical

---

[23] Njáls Saga, Ch. 114, p. 287. All saga quotations are from the Íslenzk Fornrit editions.
[24] Although in his biography, Ævi Snorra goða, possibly written by Ari inn fróði, only his contributions to Icelandic Christianity are mentioned, and the other aspects of his life are completely overlooked.
[25] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 15, p. 26.
[26] Ibid., Ch. 15, p. 26.

strength to get his way and protect himself, and was thus perhaps more conscious than most of the "Hávamál" warning of Stanza 64:

64. "Ríki sitt
skyli ráðsnotra hverr
í hófi hafa;
þá hann þat finnr
er með frœknom kømr,
at engi er einna hvatastr."

("Every sensible man should use his might in moderation, for he will find when he comes amongst the brave that no single man is the bravest.")

On the other hand, Snorri was not one of the "ósniallr" men refered to in "Hávamál", Stanza 16:

16. "Ósniallr maðr
hyggz muno ey lifa,
ef hann við víg varaz;
en elli gefr
hánom engi frið,
þótt hánom geirar gefi."

("The coward thinks he'll live forever if he bewares of battle; but old age won't leave him in peace, even if spears spare him.")

He does not shrink from battle when necessary, and is permanently prepared for this, invariably appearing accompanied by a veritable army of supporters.

According to Eyrbyggja Saga, Snorri uses his intelligence rather than his halberd to come by his power, his behaviour conforming on many occasions to the advice in the "Hávamál." An example of this is his acquisition of Helgafell. Snorri has very limited resources, but instead of squandering them unnecessarily on luxuries on his trip to Norway, which Icelanders abroad evidently tended to do,[27] he

---

[27]For example Óláf, Kjartan and Bolli spend money like water on their trips to Norway in Laxdœla Saga.

invests in serviceable but non-ostentatious clothing and horse:

> "En er þeir bjuggusk frá skip þá skauzk þar mjǫk í tvau horn um búnað þeira Snorra ok Þorleifs kimba. Þorleifr keypti þann hest, er hann fekk beztan; hann hafði ok steindan sǫðul allglæsiligan...en Snorri var í svartri kápu ok reið svǫrtu merhrossi góðu; hann hafði fornan trogsǫðul ok vápn lítt til fegrðar búin."[28]

> ("And when they rode from the ship there was a great difference between their attire, Snorri's and Þorleif kimbi's. Þorleif bought the best horse he could get; he also had a very splendid painted saddle...but Snorri was in a (plain) black cloak and rode a fine black mare. He had a trough saddle[29] and weapons that were scarcely ornamented for beauty.")

Thus Snorri recognizes the spirit of moderation in all things that pervades the "Hávamál", appreciating that:

> 61. "...skúa ok bróka
> skammiz engi maðr,
> né hestz in heldr,
> þótt hann hafit góðan."[30]

> ("...shoes and breeches shame no man, nor does his horse, even if it isn't a good one ")

while not falling into the trap of miserliness:

> 40. "Fiár síns,
> er fengit hefr,
> skylit maðr þǫrf þola:
> opt sparir leiðom
> þats hefir liúfom hugat;
> mart gengr verr en varir."[31]

> ("Once a man has won his wealth, he should not suffer want (i.e., deprive himself). One often saves for an enemy what had been meant for a friend; much goes worse than expected.")

---

[28] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 13, pp. 22-23. Theodore M. Anderson, in The Icelandic Family Saga: an Analytic Reading (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 155, goes so far as to interpret this as a deliberate pretence of poverty.

[29] These were not very stylish.

[30] "Hávamál", Stanza 61.

[31] "Hávamál", Stanza 40.

Furthermore, he keeps his funds a secret, just as the "Hávamál" prescribes:

> 63. "...einn vita,
> né annarr skal,
> þíóð veit ef þríro."[32]
>
> ("...let only one person know (i.e., one's secret), no second person should, everyone knows if a third person does.")

Thus Snorri manages to outwit his stepfather, Bǫrk, and purchase the latter's share of Snorri's father's farm for a ridiculously low price. Ignorant of Snorri's secret savings, Bǫrk confidently assumes that all the money Snorri had been given for his trip has been spent:

> "...tók Bǫrkr svá á, at honum hefði óheppliga með fét farizk, er ǫllu var eytt."[33]
>
> ("...Bǫrk took it from this that things had gone unluckiliy for him regarding money on his journey, as all of it was spent.")

Seeking to take advantage of Snorri, he readily agrees to his proposal that one should set a price on the property, but that the other should then decide which of the two should be the purchaser; if Snorri has no liquid assets, he will be forced to forego the opportunity. Bǫrk sets the price at 60 ounces of silver, whereupon Snorri produces the cash which his foster-father Þorbrand had held in safe keeping and becomes, at the tender age of fourteen, master of "it mesta rausnarbú" ("the greatest estate")[34] and a goðorð, while Bǫrk finds to his cost that "mart gengr verr en varir".

---

[32] "Hávamál", Stanza 63.
[33] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 13, p. 23.
[34] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 15, p. 26.

As the following stanza implies, acquiring wealth was only half the battle:

> 78. "Fullar grindr
> sá ek fyr Fitiungs sonom;
> nú bera þeir vánar vǫl;
> svá er auðr[35]
> sem augabragð;
> hann er valtastr vina."[36]
>
> ("Full-stocked folds (or storehouses) I saw among Fitiung's sons; now they're carrying the beggar's staff. Wealth is like the blink of an eye; (i.e., fleeting, although Gering[37] interprets "augabragð" as a mocking wink) it is the falsest friend.")

The sagas contain numerous examples of chieftains whose power is simply snatched from them by force,[38] or who lose their supporters to a more influential rival chieftain.[39] Snorri manages to maintain and increase his power by making shrewd alliances, which of course he nurtures by the "Hávamál" approved methods of gift giving and generous

---

[35] "Auðr" means literally "wealth", but in medieval Icelandic society power, prestige and wealth invariably go hand in hand. This is why, for example, the descriptions of even those vikings who could least be accused of foppishnesss dwell so much on their elaborate clothing and jewellery, the trappings of wealth and symbols of power. Furthermore, supporters expected expensive gifts and extravagant feasts on a regular basis (see "Hávamál", Stanzas 41, 42 and 44 quoted elsewhere in this chapter). Therefore, if one lacked the means to exhibit this kind of generosity, one's allies might be tempted to connect themselves instead with a more liberal chieftain who could throw a good party now and then. If wealth, "auðr", is fleeting, if follows that the secondary benefits thereof are correspondingly transient. For this reason I have interpreted "auðr" rather loosely here to include the concept of power.

[36] "Hávamál", Stanza 78.

[37] B. Sijmons and Hugo Gering, ed., Die Lieder der Edda (Halle: Buchhandlug des Waisenhauses, 1927), III, pp. 79-160.

[38] Þórarin in Laxdœla Saga, Chapter 67, for example.

[39] For example, in Njáls Saga, Ch. 107, Mǫrð Valgerdsson loses his followers to Hǫskuld Hvítanes-goði.

hospitality:

> 41. "Vápnom ok váđ
> skolo vinir gleđiaz,
> þat er á siálfum sýnst;
> viđrgefendr ok endrgefendr
> erosk lengst vinir,
> ef þat biđr at verđa vel.
>
> ("With weapon and clothing friends should gladden one another, that will reflect on oneself. A man who repays gift with gift and (another) that repays gift with gift will be friends for longest, if it is ("fated" is understood here) to turn out well.")
>
> 42. "Vin sínom
> skal mađr vinr vera
> ok gialda giǫf viđ giǫf..."[40]
>
> ("To his friends a man shall be a friend and repay gift with gift...")

Thus Snorri inspires great devotion in his followers who are prepared to do anything for him; a notable example is his kinsman Már, whose deep affection for Snorri is clearly visible in Chapter 47 when Snorri is taken hostage by Bjǫrn, even though Már has been both stabbed and exiled on Snorri's behalf. Snorri also furthers his position by using his legal knowledge to best advantage, selling his expertise in exchange for property (Chapter 31), or simply remaining neutral in return for guarantees of future exemption from prosecution by the parties who feel certain to lose if Snorri sides with their opponents:

> "Styrr svarar: "Því hét ek Snorra gođa í vár, þá er hann sat hjá málum várum Þórgestlinga, at ek skylda eigi međ fjándskap ganga í mót honum um þau mál."[41]

---

[40] "Hávamál", Stanzas 41 and 42.
[41] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 27, pp. 67-68.

("Styr answered, 'this is what I promised Snorri goði in the spring, when he sat idly by during our case against the Þórgestlings, that I would not go against him in any case.'")

This is a particularly impressive coup as Snorri gains the enviable benefit of having *carte blanche* to break any law he chooses (at least viz à viz the Kjalleklings) in return for doing absolutely nothing, for since the party for whom he failed to plead are neither friends nor kinsmen of his there is no obligation to support them anyway. He uses this privilege to the full by killing Vigfús illegally.

However, after getting away with murder Snorri is astute enough not to push his luck. This is the second time that his kinsmen have clashed with the Kjalleklings, another powerful group in the same district (they live less than 10 miles apart). Any sort of friction between the two adjacent families could all too easily result in a long and mutually disastrous feud, the seeds of which are perhaps already sown. Snorri averts this by forming the most durable alliance possible with his rivals by marrying one of them, a woman with sufficient personal attractions to render any element of self-sacrifice in Snorri's gesture typically negligible. Moreover, the alliance is sound from more than a merely social point of view, for Snorri's and his father-in-law's characters are mutually complementary:

"...ok var þat mál manna, at hvárrtveggja þótti vaxa af þessum tengðum; var Snorri goði ráðagørðarmaðr meiri ok vitrari, en Styrr atgǫngumeiri; báðir váru þeir frændmargir ok fjǫlmennir innan heraðs."[43]

---

[43]Ibid., Ch. 28, p. 75.

("...and people said that both of them were considered to have gained by this alliance; Snorri was more an adviser and wiser, and Styr more a man of action. Both had many kinsmen and numerous followers in the district.")

This alliance, obviously formed to ensure peace, is characteristic of Snorri's role of peace-maker in the sagas: In Eyrbyggja Saga, Chapter 17, he intervenes between the Kjalleklings and Illugi svarti's men who are bent on destroying each other over the right to relieve themselves on a certain piece of land:

> "Snorri goði bað sér þá manna til meðalgǫngu, ok kómu á griðum með þeim."[43]
>
> ("Then Snorri asked men to mediate, and reach a truce between them.")

In Laxdœla Saga, Chapter 69, he averts a massacre at Guðrún's wedding when a killer she has been harbouring is recognized by her husband Þorkel:

> "Snorri goði gekk þar í milli manna ok bað lægja storm þenna;...ok við umtǫlur Snorra ok þat með, at hann sá, at hann mælti satt, þá sefaðisk Þorkell."[44]
>
> ("Then Snorri goði intervened between the men and told them to allay the storm;...and at Snorri's words, especially since he saw that he was speaking the truth, Þorkel became calm.")

This is in spite of the fact that Þorkel is a close friend of the killer's victim and has sworn faithfully to avenge the crime. This type of regrettable occurrence is alluded to in "Hávamál", Stanza 32:

> 32. "...aldar róg
> þat mun æ vera,
> órir gestr við gest."

---

[43]Ibid., Ch. 17, p. 32.
[44]Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 69, p. 203.

("...strife amongst men; that must always be the outcome when guest wrangles with guest.")

Here the warning signs are indicated, presumably for someone like Snorri to recognize in time to stop the feast being ruined. Snorri is eventually responsible for the long-overdue reconciliation between Bolli Bollason and the Óláfssons.[1] In Njáls Saga he refuses to become involved in the feud, but agrees to arbitrate on Njál's behalf,[2] just as he refuses to send reinforcements against Óláf pá after his son Kjartan is killed by Snorri's kinsmen.[3]

Yet this is not to say that Snorri is motivated by altruism or the Christian precept "blessed are the peacemakers" (although he does become a Christian in later life). Snorri manipulates people to his own best advantage; to increase and strengthen his circle of allies, without whom he would be helpless:

50. "Hrørnar þǫll,
sú er stendr þorpi á,
hlýrat henne bǫrkr né barr;
svá er maðr,
sá er manngi ann;
hvat skal hann lengi lifa?"[4]

("The young fir perishes that stands in an unsheltered place, neither bark nor needles cover it. Such is the man that no one loves; why should he live long?")

Apart from that least transient of prizes, fame,[5] arbitrating between enemies wins him friendship and

---

[1] Brothers of Kjartan who has been killed by Bolli Þorleiksson who was in turn killed by the Óláfssons.
[2] Njáls Saga, Chapters 119-123.
[3] Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 49.
[4] "Hávamál", Stanza 50.
[5] See "Hávamál", Stanzas 76 and 77.

gratitude from both parties, not to mention handsome gifts. He may be a wealthy man with all the material comforts he needs, but as Stanza 39 of the "Hávamál" says:

> 39. "Fanka ek mildan mann
> eða svá matar góðan,
> at ei væri þiggia þegit,
> eða sins fiár
> svági...,
> at leið sé laun, ef þegi."
>
> ("I never met a gracious man, or one so generous with his provisions for whom it was not agreeable to receive, nor one so wealthy...that he is tired of recompense, if offered it.")

His manipulation of people is frequently quite ruthless, one of his best attested qualities:

> (Þorgils:) "'...hafa mér þaðan jafnan kǫld ráð komit; veit ek, at þetta eru ráð Snorra goða.'"[10]
>
> ("...this kind of cold advice has come my way before; I know that this is at Snorri's advice.")
>
> "Hann var góðr vinum sínum, en grimmr óvinum."[11]
>
> ("He was good to his friends but harsh towards his enemies.")
>
> "...óvinir hanns þóttusk heldr kulda af kenna ráðum hans."[12]
>
> ("...his enemies rather thought they felt coldness from his counsels.")

While he does form a few close personal attatchments, e.g., Guðrún and later her son Bolli, his attitude towards his fellow men is often that of a chess-player to his pawns. In Eyrbyggja Saga, for example, he (presumably) advises Styr

---

[10] Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 65, p. 195.
[11] Njáls Saga, Ch. 114, p. 287.
[12] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 15, p. 27.

to promise the troublesome berserks his daughter's hand in marriage in return for certain arduous chores. Upon completion of the task the exhausted pair are immediately executed for their pains and the spoils (i.e., the daughter) fall to none other than Snorri. A similar ploy is used in Laxdæla Saga; he advises Guðrún to appear to promise marriage to Þorgils Hǫlluson if he will avenge her late husband, an undertaking no one else will accept. As soon as Þorgils has done the deed at great personal risk and effort, she remorselessly turns round and marries another man whom Snorri has selected for her.

Nor are Snorri's frequent attempts to prevent bloodshed and restore peace prompted by any aversion to violence. Rather one might suspect that Snorri prefers arbitration because the outcome of any given battle can never be 100% certain, as "Hávamál", Stanza 64 (quoted above, p. 11) implies, and even if one is the victor, unpleasant repercussions in the form of outlawry, fines or blood vengeance can dim the glory of victory. In Njáls Saga, Chapter 129, for example, his advice to Ásgrím and Gizur is:

> "'...en ef þér berizk á þingi, þá ráðið ér því at eins á þá, nema þér séð allir sem øruggastir...'"[33]
>
> ("...and if things go against you at the þing, then come to blows only if everything seems safe...")

When Snorri does take part in an attack, he ensures that it is planned with military precision to the last

---

[33] Njáls Saga, Ch. 139, p. 372.

detail, including an escape route. Often he will discreetly suggest a violent course of action while preserving an uncommitted stance. In Laxdæla Saga, Chapter 67, Auðgísl Þórarinson, whose father has been usurped from his chieftaincy by Þorgils Hǫlluson, goes to Snorri for help:

> "Snorri svarar vel at einu ok tók lítinn af ǫllu ok mælti: '...Hvárt mun Þorgils enga þá menn fyrir hitta, at engi muni honum allt vilja þola? Er þat víst auðsætt, at hann er mikill maðr ok knáligr, en komit hefir orðit slíkum mǫnnum í hel, sem hann er.' Snorri gaf Auðgísli øxi rekna, er han fór í brott."[44]
>
> ("Snorri answered politely to this but made little comment about it all, and said:...'When will Þorgils meet the men that won't succumb to his every whim? It's obvious that he's a big man, and forceful, but men such as he have been sent to Hel (before).' Snorri gave Auðgísl an inlaid axe when he went away.")

The gift of the ornate axe is typically ambiguous; on one hand it is a lethal weapon, and, bearing in mind the words that accompany the gift, is obviously meant as a strong hint. On the other hand, it is an expensive and exquisite piece of craftsmanship and as such could be claimed to be a perfectly innocent gift. Later, on hearing of Þorgils' death at Auðgísl's hands, Snorri feigns surprise and disbelief to uphold this illusion of neutrality.

In Eyrbyggja Saga, when Styr seeks his help in dealing with the berserks, Snorri ensures that the conversation in which he presumably advises Styr how to trick and murder them is not overheard by anyone:

> "Síðan gengu þeir á fjallit upp ok sátu þar á tali allt til kvelds; vissi þat engi maðr, hvat þeir

---

[44] Laxdæla Saga, Ch. 67, p. 197.

tǫluðu."[53]

("Then they went up the hill and sat there talking all day til evening; no one knew what they were talking about.")

In the latter instance the reader is given sufficient information to make an educated guess about Snorri's involvement, though of course there is no evidence against him.

On other occasions one can merely speculate. For example, in Eyrbyggja Saga, Chapter 36, Snorri is strongly suspected of involvement in an attack on Arnkel. Having just lost yet another case to his rival, Snorri is called on by an outlaw (named Þorleif) seeking shelter. He turns him away, but "tǫluðu þeir mjǫk lengi, áðr hann fór á brott."[54] ("they conversed for a very long time before he went away."). Þorleif, strangely ignoring all the nearer farms (Þórsnes, Hólar, Spá-Gilsstað and Hvamm are all *en route*), heads for Arnkel's farm at Bólsstað. Arnkel offers him shelter for a few days, but refuses to admit him as a permanent member of his household, whereupon Þorleif tries to kill him. As Arnkel's behaviour is by no means unreasonable, this is unconvincing as a motive. He has done his duty according to "Hávamál", Stanza 135:

135. "...gest þú ne geyia
né á grind hrækir,
get þú váloðom vel."

("...don't abuse a guest, nor send him packing through barred gates, receive the wretched well.")

---

[53] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 28, p. 72.
[54] Ibid., Ch. 36, p. 97.

The rules of etiquette in "Hávamál", Stanza 35, state that after a few days it is time for Þorleif to go:

35. "Ganga (skal),
skala gestr vera
ey í einom staḍ;
liúfr verḍr leiḍr,
ef lengi sitr
annars fletiom á."

("One should go, a guest should never stay in one place; friendship turns to hatred if one sits (too) long on another's benches.")

Furthermore, Stanza 136 also warns against indiscriminate hospitality:

136. "Ramt er þat tré
er riḍa skal
ǫllom at upploki;
baug þú gef,
eḍa þat biḍia mun
þér læs hvers á liḍo."[3']

[3']This problematic stanza has been interpreted in a variety of ways: Bj. M. Ólsen, in "Til Hávamál," Arkiv for nordisk filologi, 31 (1915), pp. 85ff, interprets it as meaning that a door must be strong to hold off all comers; therefore it's prudent to give the gift of a ring ("baugr") to all visitors, to dissuade them from doing one harm. Gering, in Die Lieder der Edda, III, p. 141, takes the opposite view: one should coat one's wooden bolt with metal so that it will slide open easily, enabling the host to offer gifts and hospitality to every passing beggar. The version suggested in Paul B. Taylor and W. H. Auden, trans.,The Elder Edda: A Selection (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 56, is that the beam ("tré") over the door is heavy, so to guard against the ill-luck of it falling and crushing one's guests, "baug" is a horse-shoe to be hung on it. Both Henry Adams Bellows, trans., The Poetic Edda (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 59, and Lee M. Hollander, trans., The Poetic Edda (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), p. 35, basically agree with Ólsen, the former, however, differing in his translation of "baug" as a reinforcing ring for the beam or bolt across one's door to keep beggars out, either in case they do you harm ("læsa á liḍo" meaning something like "putting one's limbs out of joint") or because it would be a foolish extravagance to have to give an expensive piece of jewellery to every single vagabond; one would quickly be ruined. The consensus of opinion seems to be that this stanza warns against overdoing the hospitality.

Furthermore, as Þorleif is from the other side of Iceland, he can have no other personal score with Arnkel, and it also seems odd that if he were inclined to kill someone just for denying him hospitality he would assault the man who took him in and spare the one that turned him away. Small wonder, then that:

> "Sá orðrómr lagðisk á, at Snorri goði hefði þenna mann sendan til hǫfuðs Arnkatli."[11]
>
> ("It was rumoured that Snorri goði had sent this man for Arnkel's head.")

However, nothing can be proved, even when subsequent events show that Snorri does indeed have the intention of killing his rival (he succeeds in the next chapter), and he can confidently allow these rumours to circulate:

> "Snorri lét þetta mál eigi til sín taka ok lét hér ræða um hvern þat er vildi..."[12]
>
> ("Snorri didn't take this rumour to heart and let anyone talk about it that wished to...")

The difference between Arnkel's reaction at this point and Snorri's in a similar situation is also worthy of note: Arnkel kills his assailant on the spot, whereas Snorri (in Eyrbyggja Saga, Chapter 26) instead lets his proxy assailant live so that he can extract evidence from him, and, forewarned, kill the man behind the attack (Vígfús) before he can try it again.

Snorri's cover-up tactics actually succeed in fooling the critic Hermann-Josef Seggewiß:

---

[11] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 36, p. 98.
[12] Ibid., Ch. 36, p. 98.

"Keine Stelle nennt ihn als den
Mörder oder Töter eines Mannes..."[40]

("He is nowhere named as any man's murderer or killer.")

This is not exactly true. Even if one were unable to read between the lines and come to informed conclusions, a skill at which the saga audience would undoubtedly have been adept, one can hardly ignore all the skaldic verses that commemorate Snorri's various valiant slayings; for example, Chapter 44 includes this verse:

"...þar lé þá Snorri
þegna at hjǫrregni,
fjǫrvi fimm numna;
svá skal fjándr hegna."[41]

("...there Snorri slaughtered /thanes (yeomen) with sword-rain, /seized from five their lives; /so perish all enemies.")

Chapter 26 also contains a verse that describes in heroic terms how Snorri felled his first victim, Vigfús í Drápuhlíð, besides the account of Snorri and his men sneaking up on him, concealed by the smoke from the charcoal Vigfús is making, dispatching him and burying the body. If nothing can be adequately proven against Snorri, then no counter-action can be taken; clearly he is a master of the art of having his cake and eating it.

20th century critics may impose a negative moral judgement on Snorri for such strategies:

---

[40]Hermann-Josef Seggewiß, Goði und Hǫfðingi: die literarische Darstellung und Funktion von Gode und Hauptling in den Islandersagas (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Verlag, 1978), p. 32.
[41]Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 44, p. 124.

"Sie (die geschilderten Ereignisse in Eyrbyggja Saga) alle weisen Snorri goði aus als einen Prototypen der schlauen und gescheiten."[62]

("All the events portrayed in Eyrbyggja Saga reveal Snorri goði to be a prototype of slyness and cunning.")

"...all in all...not a man to admire" [63]

However, the saga writers evidently regarded his behaviour in a more favourable light. His most treacherous plots are praised as good, sound counsel; Magnusson and Pálsson even translate "heilráðr" as "honest advice" at one point.[64] He is, after all, merely conforming to the "Hávamál", which specifically sanctions treachery - Óðin himself is guilty of it:

110. "...baugeið Óðinn
hygg ek at unnit hafi;
hvat skal hans tryggðom trúa![65]

("...(on his) ring Óðin swore, I think; who is going to trust his integrity?")

Hypocrisy, backstabbing and false oaths are quite legitimate if employed against those who have no right to expect better of one - to treat friends or relatives in this way would, of course, be quite another matter:

45. "Ef þú átt annan,
þannz þú illa trúir,

---

[62]Hermann-Josef Seggewiß, Goði und Hǫfðingi, p.68.
[63]Lee M. Hollander and Paul Schach, trans., Eyrbyggja Saga (University of Nebraska Press, 1959), Introduction, p. xv.
[64]Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, trans., Laxdæla Saga (1969; rpt. Bungay: Penguin, 1981), Ch. 68.
[65]"Hávamál", Stanza 110. In his quest for poetry Óðin swears a powerful oath to the giants and then breaks it. He also has a policy of promising victory in battle and subsequently granting it to the other side, in order to get the best warriors to Valhǫll, where they will one day be needed at Ragnarǫk.

vildu af hánom þó gott geta,
fagrt skaltu við þann mæla,
en flátt hyggia
ok gialda lausung við lygi.

("If you have another that you distrust, but want to get something from him, you should speak him fair but think falsely, and repay lying with lies.")

46. "þat er enn of þann
er þú illa trúir
ok þér er grunr at hans geði,
hlæia skaltu við þeim
ok um hug mæla;
glík skolo giǫld giǫfom."[‘‘]

("It's the same with the one whom you distrust and whose thoughts seem suspicious to you. You should laugh at him (behind his back)[‘’] and speak deviously ("talk around your (real) thoughts"), repay his "gifts" in kind.")

The "Hávamál" points out in Stanzas 85-89 that even the most naive should not be so foolish as to trust those who have previously done one ill (or other things experience has proved to be unreliable):

87. "...val nýfeldom..."

("...a newly-felled enemy...")

89. "...bróðurbana sínom,
þótt á brauto mæti...
verðit maðr svá tryggr
at þesso trúi ǫllo!"

("...your brother's killer if you meet him at large...let no man be so trusting as to trust all these!")

One of Snorri's more fortunate intended victims, Bjǫrn, (who has been bringing shame on Snorri's family by having an illicit affair with his sister Þuríð) acknowledges this; when attacked he seems unsurprised:

[‘‘]"Hávamál", Stanzas 45 and 46.
[‘’]B. Sijmons and Hugo Gering, Die Lieder der Edda, III: Gering takes this as insincere smiles of friendship.

"'Svá er háttat, Snorri bóndi, at ek dyljumk eigi við, at ek hafa gǫrt þá hluti til yðvar, er þér meguð vel sakar á gefa...'"[68]

("'So, it has come to this, farmer Snorri, but I don't deny that I have done such things to you that you may well blame me for.'")

Thus, by Icelandic standards, any sympathy we may feel for some of the victims of Snorri's treachery, such as Guðrún's unlucky suitor in Laxdæla Saga, would be quite misplaced, given that Þorgils and Snorri are old enemies:

"Opt var heldr fátt með Snorra goða: þótti Snorra Þorgils hlutgjarn ok áburðarmikill."[69]

("Things were rather icy between him and Snorri. Snorri thought Þorgils interfering and very vain.")

Under these circumstances, Þorgils, according to the "Hávamál", has only himself to blame for trusting the pair of them, whose close friendship is common knowledge. Heeding the advice of "Hávamál", Stanza 84, might also have stood Þorgils in good stead on this occasion:

84. "Meyiar orðom
skyli manngi trúa,
né því at kveða kona..."

("A man shouldn't trust a maiden's words, nor what a woman says...")

Similarly, Halli and Leiknir, the berserks in Eyrbyggja Saga, having caused nothing but trouble and finally demanded the hand of Styr's daughter with menaces,[70] can hardly

---

[68] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 47, p. 134.
[69] Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 57, p. 170.
[70] Marriage to a berserk was generally seen in the sagas as a fate worse than death. See also Egils Saga, Ch. 64, in which the hero takes on a berserk who is demanding Egil's host's daughter, much to the family's acute chagrin.

reasonably expect to be treated any more considerately themselves.

Ethically, then, Snorri is very much a "Hávamál" man, of whom Óðin would be proud. Even his most mundane conduct reflects "Hávamál" practicality; for example, "Hávamál", Stanza 112, makes this recommendation:

> 112. "Ráðomk þér, Loddfáfnir,
> at þú ráð nemir...
> nótt þú rísat,
> nema á niósn sér
> eða þú leitir þér innan út staðar."
>
> ("Be advised, Loddfáfnir, to take this advice...do not get up at night except to keep watch or to visit the outhouse.")

In Chapter 26 of Eyrbyggja Saga there is a plot against Snorri's life; to wait for him to emerge from the safety of his house to visit the outhouse and then perpetrate the crime under the cover of darkness. But Snorri, knowing that as a public figure and a powerful goði he has many envious rivals, not to mention all the personal enemies he has made, is considerably more vulnerable to attack than the average man (at whom the "Hávamál" is mainly directed), and so takes extra precautions. He not only follows this piece of "Hávamál" advice to the letter, but takes it one step further: he takes his men out with him, which, as visiting the outhouse is hardly a communal activity, we can only assume is for protection. Thus, when the assassin hiding in the loft strikes his blow, Snorri and his supporters are so close together that the man behind Snorri forms a human shield with the result that no one is seriously injured,

least of all the intended victim. By way of contrast, Arnkel is wont to work alone outside at night so that his slaves may rest:

> "...en um vetrinn var þat siðr Arnkels, at flytja heyit um nætr, er nýlýsi váru, því at þrælarnir unnu alla daga..."[11]
>
> ("...in the winter it was Arnkel's custom to move the hay at night when there was a new moon, because the slaves worked all day...")

By ignoring the "Hávamál" wisdom of Stanza 112, Arnkel makes himself an easy target for assassination, for, as Snorri points out in great detail (in Eyrbyggja Saga, Chapter 47), it is much harder to overcome a man inside a house than one outside. The success of the attack can be partly ascribed to the time of day it occurs, namely the early hours of the morning.[12]

Snorri goði is a man of great insight and is usually the one to give advice to others. Yet he himself conforms to the advice in the "Hávamál" as closely as if he were consciously following it, providing a superb example of the applicability of the "Hávamál" to tenth century Scandinavian

---

[11] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 37, p. 100.

[12] This is a very popular and usually effective time to strike throughout the sagas, which gives credence to the advice of "Hávamál", Stanza 58:

> 58. "Ár skal rísa
> (sá) er annars vill
> fé eða fiǫr hafa;
> sialdan liggiandi úlfr
> lær um getr,
> né sofandi maðr sigr."
>
> ("He that wants (to take) another's money or his life should rise early. A reposing wolf seldom gets the ham, or a sleeping man victory.")

society. Of course there is no direct proof that Snorri had digested the "Hávamál" as a poem, and one might equally well conclude that the "Hávamál" reflects the values of Snorri and his ilk as vice versa. However, in Chapter 47 of Eyrbyggja Saga, Snorri quotes from another of the old traditional poems later to be compiled in what has since become known as the Elder Edda:[73]

> "'...ok er því fangs ván at frekum úlfi, er hann (i.e., Bjǫrn) er...'"[74]
>
> ("...conflict is to be expected from a prowling wolf such as he is...")

Compare this with "Reginsmál", Stanza 13:

> "...oc er mér fangs vón at frekom úlfi."[75]

This provides some encouragement to believe that he may well have been familiar with other Eddic poems also, including, perhaps, the "Hávamál".

Of all the wise men in the *Íslendingasögur*, Snorri goði provides the almost definitive example of the "Hávamál" "fróðr maðr". The others that I am about to cite as examples all conform to the advice and standards of the "Hávamál" in their own respective ways and to varying degrees, each providing a good illustration of certain individual points of the "Hávamál" in their actions, but it cannot be said of them, as it can of Snorri, that an essential part of their personality reflects the very spirit of the "Hávamál". Njál,

---

[73]As is pointed out in: Paul Schach and Lee M. Hollander, trans., Eyrbyggja Saga, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), p. 102.
[74]Ibid., Ch. 47, p. 133.
[75]Jón Helgasson, ed. Eddadigte, (København: Munksgaard, 1962), III, p. 56.

for example, acts according to the "Hávamál" advice, but his natural bent is more toward a broadly Christian philosophy. Similarly, Óláf pá, at least as the writer of Laxdœla Saga portrays him, is cast more in a vaguely chivalric mould (however anachronistic this may seem). Only Kveld-Úlf and his grandson Egil Skallagrímsson appear to be portrayed as authentic characters of the Viking Age, and come the closest to Snorri in demonstrating the "Hávamál" philosophy as a whole way of life, rather than a random collection of handy suggestions.

III. KVELD-ÚLF AND HIS DESCENDANTS

The Viking Age is possibly best remembered as a period of travel and expansion, and Egils Saga features this aspect of life in the Saga Age more than most sagas, even describing the political tensions in Norway at this time that (supposedly) encouraged many Norwegians to emigrate to Iceland. The central characters also go on many Viking trips, an aspect of life for which the "Hávamál" has plenty of advice. In fact, a great many of the stanzas seem to be directed towards the traveller, the man alone in unfamiliar surroundings, encountering potentially hostile strangers.

Extreme caution is urged in these circumstances, but the perilous and lonely moments of being away from home are only one side of the coin. Stanza 18, for example, indicates that travel is regarded as a valuable education:

> 18. "Sá einn veit
> er víða ratar
> ok hefir fiǫld um farit,
> hverio geði
> stýrir gumna hverr,
> sá er vitandi er vits
>
> ("He alone knows, who has wandered far and has travelled a lot, what sort of mind each man possesses, for he has privileged understanding.")

Kveld-Úlf gains such experience in a typical manner, by going Viking in his youth. It could well be on the basis of his wide experience that he is able to make his shrewd and accurate assessment of the unprecedented situation when Haraldr inn hárfagri ("fine-hair") starts challenging the other Norwegian kings, since the average farmer would have little experience of kings and would therefore be less able

to perceive "hverio geði stýrir Haraldr". Astute enough to realize that Harald will probably be the victor, yet perceiving that the man arrogant enough to subjugate the whole of Norway would be an unpredictable master, Kveld-Úlf refrains from siding against him, but respectfully declines to serve him either. Though he is offered riches and prestige if he will join Harald's court, he prefers to stay on his own, much humbler farm in obscurity:

> " 'Mun ek nú heima sitja ok láta af at þjóna konungum.'"[1]
>
> ("I'm going to stay at home and decline to serve kings.")

At least there he is his own master and not, like a beggar, dependent on the goodwill of others for his survival. This line of thinking is alluded to in Stanzas 36 and 37 of the "Hávamál":

> 36. "Bú er betra,
> þótt lítit sé
> halr er heima hverr;
> þótt tvær geitr eigi
> ok taugreptan sal,
> þat er þó betra en bœn."
>
> ("A house is better, though it be small,
> everyone is (his own) master at home. Though one
> owns (only) two goats and a room with a wattled
> roof, (at least) that's much better than begging.")
>
> 37.
> "...blóðugt er hiarta
> þeim er biðia skal
> sér í mál hvert matar."
>
> ("...bleeding is the heart of the man who has
> to beg for his food at every mealtime.")

His son Grím is more explicit - he refuses:

---

[1] Egils Saga, Ch. 5, p. 13.

"'...því at hann (Kveld-Úlfr) skal vera yfirmaðr minn, meðan han lifir.'"''

("...because he (Kveld-Úlf) will be my overlord while he's alive")

Kveld-Úlf seems to be a man who reflects the "Hávamál" outlook in every aspect of his life, from the most trivial detail to quite drastic decisions. For example, the saga writer couples his material success with his habit of early rising, making the same connexion between the two as the "Hávamál":

"Hann tók lends manns rétt...ok gerðisk maðr ríkr. Svá er sagt, at Úlfr var búsýslumaðr mikill; var þat siðr hans at rísa upp árdegis ok ganga þá um sýslur manna eða þar er smiðir váru ok sjá yfir fénað sinn ok akra..." ''

("He took the rank of a landed man...and became a rich man. It is said that Úlf was a skilled farmer; it was his habit to get up early in the morning and then go around as an overseer or to where the smiths were, and look over his livestock and lands...")

"Hávamál", Stanza 59:

59. "Ár skal rísa,
sá er á yrkenr fá,
ok ganga síns verka á vit:
mart um dvelr
þann er um morgin sefr,
hálfr er auðr und hvǫtom."

("He who has few workers should rise early and go to do his own work: much remains (to be done) for the man that sleeps in in the morning. Speed is halfway towards wealth.")

Egil inherits this habit, too - early morning is evidently the time when he is at his most creative:

''Egils Saga, Ch. 5, p. 13.
''Ibid., Ch. 1, p. 4.

"Vask árvakr,
bark orð saman
með málþjóns
morginverkum..."[37]

("I wake early to put words together, the morning task of my tongue...[38]")

When the king siezes Þórólf's ship, Kveld-Úlf takes the loss philosophically:

"'...ok þætti mér ekki mikils vert um félát þetta, er Þórólfr hefir misst nú, ef nú færi eigi hér it meira eptir.'"[39]

("...it would not seem to me of great importance, the loss of this property that Þórólf has just lost (i.e., incurred), if nothing else is to follow.")

This corresponds to the system of priorities put forward in the "Hávamál" in the many stanzas concerning wealth and life, for example, Stanza 70:[40]

70. "Betra er lifðom
ok sæl lifðom;
ey getr kvikr kú;
eld sá ek upp brenna
auðgom manni fyrir,
en úti var dauðr fyr durom."

("Life is better, and healthy (or lucky) life: it's always the live man that gets the cow. I saw flames burning upwards for the rich man, and outside the door he was dead.")

Wealth is nice if you can get it, but there are more important things, such as being one's own master (see Stanza 37, above, p. 38) and staying alive.

Kveld-Úlf and Grím are also "fróðir" in the "Hávamál" sense in that they know when to leave:

---

[37]Ibid., Ch. 78, p. 267. This quotation is from the last stanza of Egil's poem to Arinbjǫrn.
[38]Literally, "speech-servant".
[39]Ibid., Ch. 18, p. 45.
[40]See also Stanza 75.

31. "Fróðr þykkiz
sá er flótta tekr
gestr at gest hæðinn;
veita gǫrla
sá er um verði glissir,
þótt hann með grǫmom glami."[33]

("He is considered wise who takes flight when (as a) guest he mocks (another) guest: he doesn't fully realize (what he's doing), who trifles with enemies.")

Having publicly defied the King, thus humiliating him in front of his court at a time when he is probably extra anxious to demonstrate his newly acquired power, Grím and his followers take to their heels.[34] This turns out to be a wise move as Harald immediately thinks up some pretext for having them killed. Father and son then decide to flee to Iceland, the traditional refuge for opponents of Harald's tyranny. Of course the "Hávamál" is not advocating leaving the country at the first sign of trouble, but this case, involving royalty, is obviously on a much grander scale than the average man would encounter every day, so the principle inherent in this piece of "Hávamál" advice is interpreted here on a correspondingly larger scale.

Later, Grím's son Egil deliberately mocks the royal couple at a feast:

"þá gekk Bárðr til dróttningar ok sagði henni, at þar var maðr sá er skǫmm færði at þeim ok aldregi drakk svá at eigi segði hann sik þyrsta."[35]

---

[33] "Hávamál", Stanza 31.
[34] Egils Saga, Ch. 25. Grím's words of refusal may seem polite enough but this does not alter the fact that by openly flouting Harald's authority and reminding everyone present of Harald's rather shabby treatment of Þórólf he is mortifying the king.
[35] Ibid., Ch. 44, pp. 108-109.

("Then Bárð went to the queen and told her that there was a man there who was bringing dishonour on them, and never drank so much that he said he wasn't thirsty (any more).")

Egil's actions in gulping down drink after drink and still claiming to be thirsty imply that Bárð is not providing adequately for his guests. He even goes so far as to state this in a poem.[1] Since the feast is in honour of the king and queen this severe and unwarranted criticism also reflects on them. Pálsson and Edwards' translation[2] actually uses the word "mocking". Queen Gunnhild's reaction is predictable - she orders him killed. But Egil, like his father, seems to be familiar with this aspect of "Hávamál" wisdom and also makes good his escape before a second attempt can be made on his life.

The above mentioned is only one of the many occasions on which Egil gets himself into trouble because he is drunk.[3] The "Hávamál" expressly warns against drunkenness in Stanza 12:

12. "Era svá gott,
sem gott kveða,
ǫl alda sonom;
þvíat færa veit,
er fleira drekkr,
síns til geðs gumi."

---

[1] Nordal, in Egils Saga, p. 108, paraphrases the poem this way in a footnote: "Þu sagðir góðum gesti, að skortur væri á öli..."

[2] Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., Egil's Saga (Aylesbury: Penguin, 1976), p. 101.

[3] According to Thomas Bredsdorff, Kaos og kærlighed: en studie i islændingesagaers livsbillede (Copenhagen: Gyldendals Uglebøger, 1971), Egil is drinking to drown his sorrows, namely his unrequited lust for the unattainable Queen Gunnhild.

("There is not so much good as is said, in ale for the sons of mortals; for the more he drinks, the further a man drains himself of his wits.")

As if to stress the importance of this, the message is repeated in Stanzas 11, 13, 14, 17, 19, 131 and 137. The reasons for this are perhaps more obvious in Egils Saga than in any other, although examples from other sagas will show that illustrations of the perils of drinking were indeed frequent enough to warrant the emphasis placed on it in the "Hávamál".

There are several incidents in this and other sagas which conclusively demonstrate the evils of alcohol, this having nothing to do with its being an ungodly vice or bad for the liver. Chapter 12 of Egils Saga contains a hypothetical case of over-indulgence; Hárek Hildiríðarson informs the King of an alleged plot against him:

"'Þá var ætlat, ef þér yrðið drukknir ok lægið sofandi, at veita yðr atgǫngu með eldi ok vápnum...'"[••]

("'It was the intention if you (pl.) got drunk and lay asleep to attack you with fire and weapons...'")

The plot may be a complete fabrication by Hárek, but it was obviously standard enough practice to convince the king. Óðin even has a charm to save his friends from such a fate ("Hávamál" Stanza 152).[••] This very method of execution is attempted, for instance, in Eyrbyggja Saga, Chapter 31:

••Egils Saga, Ch. 12, p. 31.

•• The spells in the "Lióðatal" cover situations that the average Norseman could reasonably expect to find himself in from time to time, such as seducing bond-women, gaining victory in battle, avoiding drowning in storms at sea.

"þenna vetr um jól hafði Þórólfr drykkju mikla ok veitti kappsamliga þrælum sínum; en er þeir váru drukknir, eggjar hann þá at fara inn til Úlfarsfells ok brenna Úlfar inni".[11]

(That winter, around Yule, Þórolf held a large feast and plied his slaves liberally (with drink); and when they were drunk he persuaded them to go over to Úlfarsfell and burn Úlf inside.")[12]

Note that the above-mentioned Þórólf makes sure that his slaves' judgement is suitably impaired by ale before asking them to undertake this foolhardy venture; they are captured and hung almost immediately, partly, no doubt, because of their condition. In Chapter 46 of Egils Saga, Egil uses the same tactics - successfully - against some Baltic peasants he and his men have been raiding, and have subsequently been captured by:

"En þeir, er við drykkjuna sá, fundu eigi fyrr en loginn stóð inn um ræfrit."[13]

("And those who were at the drinking table didn't notice (i.e., Egil setting fire to the hall) until the fire came in through the roof.")

The most famous incidences of this rather nasty trick are of course in the "Atlakviða" and the Nibelungenlied.

There are also other, less dramatic reasons not to over-indulge. In Egils Saga, Chapter 49, the Queen's brother Eyvind gets himself outlawed by starting a drunken brawl in the high temple at Gaular, and in Chapter 57, Berg-Onund is

---

[11] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 31, p. 83.
[12] Þórólf bægifót, a senile and cantankerous farmer, has stolen his neighbour, Úlf's, hay. His son, Arnkel, has in return taken seven of his father's oxen and given them to Úlf as compensation for the theft. Þórólf is furious.
[13] Egils Saga, Ch. 46, p. 118.

so enebriated that he forgets to exercise the caution urged in "Hávamál", Stanza 112 (quoted in chapter 1, p. 33), and is lured into venturing out at night, enabling Egil to overpower and kill him easily. After the singularly unsavoury incident in Chapter 71, Egil's behaviour is universally condemned, revealing that public opinion agreed with the "Hávamál":

> "En allir mæltu þat...at Egill skyldi fara allra manna arastr ok hann væri inn versti maðr af þessu verki, er hann skyldi eigi ganga út, er hann vildi spýja, en verða eigi at undrum inni í drykkjustofunni."[1]
>
> ("Everyone said...that Egil should be known as the basest of men, and that he was the worst of men because (of what he did when) he wouldn't go outside when he wanted to spew, instead of making an exhibition of himself in the drinking-hall.")

It may, perhaps, seem strange to include in a thesis on "Hávamál" wisdom a man who so flagrantly and repeatedly violates one of its most important rules. Ordinarily, such persistent enebriation would have to be considered a sure sign of stupidity. Egil, however, could be partly excused, on the grounds that the Norsemen seem to have perceived some connexion between drinking and poetry. The myth concerning the acquistion of poetry related in the "Hávámál" names the source of poetry as an alcoholic beverage, the mead Óðrœrir, and the etymological link between the words "Óðin", (name of the god associated with poetry and battle), "Óðrœrir", and "óðr", meaning poetry but also wrath or frenzy, possibly originally a drunken state, also bears witness to some sort

---

[1]Ibid., Ch. 71, p. 226.

of link between being in an altered state and composing poetry. It seems that getting drunk was thought to help one 'write' skaldic verse, and we note indeed that Egil's verses are frequently composed on occasions when he has been liberally plied with ale. Furthermore, as the next paragraphs will show, poetic ability was highly valued for many reasons, one of these being that it was regarded as a supreme form of wisdom. This is also reflected in the "Hávamál", for the effects on Óðin of drinking Óðrœrir, described in Stanza 141, are said to be an increase in wisdom rather than a mere sudden burst of artistic inspiration:

> 141. "...þá nam ek frævaz
> ok fróðr vera..."
>
> ("...then I began to flourish and to become
> wise...")

Therefore Egil's undeniably excessive drinking, though superficially seeming unwise in that it frequently lands him in trouble, could also be seen in another light. If his drunkenness is in some way releasing his creative talents, then one might argue that drink, far from diminishing his wits, is actually transporting him to a higher level of wisdom.

Egils Saga is the saga of a skald and contains numerous examples of his verse. Most of the sagas quote skaldic poems to verify or illustrate some incident, but Egils Saga includes several long poems in their entirety which is quite unusual, although Kormáks Saga, whose main character is also

a poet, has quite a wealth of examples of his shorter poems. Poetic ability is known to have been greatly revered in medieval Scandinavia, and this is also reflected in the "Hávamál". The pains to which Óðin goes in his quest for Óðrœrir, the magical mead of poetry, reveal how highly he prizes this. Egil's choice of kennings for his poetry, e.g., "Yggs full", prove that he was certainly aware of this myth related in the "Hávamál."[1] In fact, similar allusions to the same myth in kennings used by other skalds, such as Kormák, for example, are quite commonplace. Familiarity with this particular story is especially marked in Egil's "Sonatorrek", which many critics interpret as meaning that Óðin has taken something, namely his sons, but has also given something in return, namely the gift of poetry which in some way assuages his grief.[2] Poetry saves Egil's life in Chapter 60 when he composes the "Hǫfuðlausn", and in Chapter 22, Harald values his skald so much that he refuses him leave to go, "fyrir sakar íprótta hans",[3] ("for the

---

[1]Though he could equally well have known the same myth from another source. Many of the poems in the Elder Edda overlap in their subject matter, for example, which suggests that they may have been versifications of commonly known myths and legends.

[2]Klaus von See, however, disagrees. In his article "Sonatorrek und Hávamál," Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum 99 (1970), I. pp. 26-33, he argues that Egil, having abandoned the god of his father and his youth, Þór, in favour of Óðin, now feels let down. The "Sonatorrek's" reference to poetry as a gift is intended sarcastically, for it is no compensation for Egil's sons, having done nothing for him all his life but make him enemies. Far from being soothed by his own composition, Egil bewails the fact that he has no one to support him in his vengeance against the god, not the fact that the Æsir are beyond the power of human vendetta.

[3]Egils Saga, Ch. 22, p. 56.

sake of his skill"), despite having made it intolerable for Qlvir, as the slain Þórólf's kinsman to

> "'...eiga drykk ok sess við þá menn, er báru vápn á Þórólf, frænda okkarn.'"**

> ("'...share drink and seat with those men who bore weapons against Þórólf, our kinsman.'")

Skaldic ability was therefore not always a boon; Egil himself expresses exasperation at it on more than one occasion. For example, in Chapter 78, he is given a shield, whereupon he exclaims:

> "'Gefi hann allra manna armastr! Ætlar hann, at ek skyla þar vaka yfir ok yrka um skjǫld hans? Nú taki hest minn; skal ek ríða eptir honum ok drepa hann.'"**

> ("'Curse the man! Does he intend that I should stay awake all night to write verses about his shield? Get my horse now; I'm going to ride after him and kill him!'")

But it is not merely skaldship that is revered; eloquence in general is perceived as an inseparable part of wisdom. This is shown in both the "Hávamál" and in the *Islendingasögur*. The "Hávamál", for example, condemns the inarticulate man as an "afglapi" (Stanza 17), "ósnotr maðr" (Stanza 26), and "dælskr" (Stanza 57).'** In the later

---

**Ibid., Ch. 22, pp. 56-57.
**Ibid., Ch. 78, p. 272.
'**Mindless babbling was equally bad, however, according to "Hávamál", Stanza 27:

> 27 "...veita maðr, hinn er vækti veit,
> þótt han mæli til mart."

> ("he reveals it, the man who knows nothing,
> when he speaks to excess.")

The sagas contain numerous examples of self-important braggarts whose garrulousness serves only to make them appear extremely foolish and usually gets them killed into the bargain. Víga-Hrapp (see p. 51, fn. 106) is one, as is Þorgrím of Fóstbrœðra Saga, who courts his own death by

sagas, the concept of eloquence also includes the ability to plead lawsuits skillfully. Indeed, one sometimes gets the impression that the way a case is pleaded holds more sway than the substance of what is being said. Thus a good speaker held considerable power and could frequently persuade people to act against their better judgement. For example, Arinbjǫrn manages to make the understandably extremely reluctant Ásgerð consent to marry her brother-in-law Egil, no small feat since Egil is not exactly every maiden's dream by any standards. Arinbjǫrn's arguments are also instrumental in dissuading Eirík Blóðøx from awarding Egil the fate he so richly deserves, as Eirík's words show:

> "'Þú hefir flutt mál Egils með ákafa miklum... Nú skal þat gera fyrir þínar sakar, sem þú hefir beðit, at Egill skal fara frá mínum fundi heill ok óskaðaðr.'"[**]

> ("'You have pleaded Egil's case with great fervour...Now I'll grant what you asked for your sake, that Egil shall go from us in one piece and unscathed.'")

The "Hávamál" places considerable emphasis on the ability to reply well, Stanza 26 for example:

> 26. "Ósnotr maðr
> þikkiz alt vita,
> ef hann á sér í vá vero;
> hitki hann veit,
> hvat hann skal við kveða,
> ef hans freista firar."

> ("The stupid man thinks he knows everything if he keeps to himself in a corner; if called upon he doesn't know what he should say in reply if men (or

---

'**(cont'd) bragging of a killing he has committed in the hearing of his victim's sworn-brother.
'*'Egils Saga, Ch. 61, p. 193.

gods) put him to the test.")

This does not merely refer to conversational talents, although the sagas show that this was also highly regarded. In the "Hávamál" a man who is unable to come up with an apt response or provide solutions to the problems of others is dubbed ignorant; the word "ósnotr" is used in this context in Stanzas 26, 27 and 103. Conversely, one who can solve problems and is quick witted is considered "fróðr", and this is certainly upheld in the sagas; wise men invariably reveal their wisdom by giving good advice. In fact, the concepts of wisdom and advising are so closely connected that they are usually mentioned in the same breath. For example, Kveld-Úlf is described thus:

> "Kunni hann til alls góð ráð at leggin, því at hann var forvitri."[102]
>
> ("He had good advice for every situation because he was very wise".)

However, providing answers is only half of the matter; keeping oneself well informed by asking the right questions is equally important:

> 28. "Fróðr sá þykkiz
> er fregna kann
> ok segia it sama..."[103]
>
> ("He is considered wise who knows how to ask questions and also to reply...")

This is demonstrated in Egils Saga, Chapters 33 and 34, when Skallagrím fails to question his guests closely enough and thereby lands himself in a potentially damaging situation.

---

[102]Ibid., Ch. 1, p. 4.
[103]"Hávamál", Stanza 28.

Had he gleaned enough information he would have discovered that the couple he is harbouring have eloped,'[*] incurring the wrath of Þórir Haraldsson, a great chieftain, the bride's brother and foster-brother to Grím. Having unwittingly supported the unlawful abduction by housing the offenders for a considerable period, he has to all appearances sided against his friend. Having taken the couple in, however, it would go against the rules of hospitality to turn against them. When chided for not revealing this vital piece of information, Bjǫrn, the groom, replies:

> "'Satt eitt hefi ek þér sagt, Grímr, en eigi máttu ámæla mér fyrir þat, þótt ek segða þér eigi lengra en þú spurðir.'"[**]
>
> ("'I have told you only the truth, but you mustn't blame me for telling you nothing more than you asked.'")

He points out that the onus is on oneself to find things out, not on others to supply you with the information you may need.'[*]

Of course there is also a murkier side to eloquence, a highly valued gift as we have seen; perhaps too highly. The

---

[*]A serious matter in medieval Scandinavia, when marriages, or at least a woman's first marriage, were usually arranged by her family, although she would have the opportunity to veto their choice.

[**]Egils Saga, Ch. 34, p. 87.

[*]Víga-Hrapp in Laxdœla Saga, Chapters 63 & 64, also demonstrates this simple fact. He joins an ambush but never stops bragging of his own valour long enough to ask pertinent questions, and is thus ill-informed of the situation he has got himself into. He is consequently the first to be ingloriously killed because of a stupid display of bravado, without striking so much as a single blow. He is clearly intended to cut a pathetic figure.

arrangement of words, especially in poetry, was regarded as an extremely mysterious, even supernatural thing, which humankind had acquired only by chance when Óðin, having risked all to steal the poetic mead from the giants, spilled some over Miðgard while fleeing back to Ásgard. Obviously something so jealously guarded must have extremely powerful properties. There is even a suggestion of some supernatural assistance in the composition of Egil's "Hǫfuðlausn":

> "Hann (Arinbjǫrn) sá, hvar hamhleypa nǫkkur fór annan veg af húsinu."[**]
>
> ("He (Arinbjǫrn) saw where some sort of shape-changer was going the other way from the house.")

On the most mundane level, poetry could endow both the skald and the subject of his verse with a kind of immortality, as these words from the last stanza of Egil's eulogy to Arinbjǫrn indicate:

> "Hlóðk lofkǫst,
> þanns lengi stendr,
> óbrotgjarn,
> í bragar túni."[**]
>
> ("I pile up the mound of praise which will stand for ages, without crumbling, in the realm (literally "meadows") of poetry.")

This is why Eirik passes up the long awaited opportunity to

[**]Egils Saga, Ch. 59, p. 183. There seems to be no evidence to support the theory that this shape-changer is Gunnhild trying to stop Egil. It is true that she is reputed to be skilled in sorcery, and she is certainly shown to be 'bewitching' in the figurative sense, at least, but there is never the slightest suggestion that she also has shape-changing powers. Egil, on the other hand, comes from a long line of renowned shape-changers. It therefore seems logical to assume that the creature at Egil's window is Egil himself.

[**]Ibid., Ch. 78, p. 267.

get even with his old enemy, who had killed one of the Queen's relatives, even though he and everyone present must know the poem to be a string of hypocrisies and the basest of flattery. To quote the "Hávamál", Stanza 77:

> 77. "...ek veit einn,
> at aldri deyr,
> dómr af dauðan hvern."
>
> ("...I know of one thing that never dies, the judgement on each dead man.")

Even everyday speech could wield untold power - the sagas show time and again that a verbal insult was considered every bit as damaging as a physical assault, and was avenged in the same way. Stanza 118 of the "Hávamál" gives an example of how slanderous lies can kill:

> 118. "...fláráð tunga
> varð hánom at fiǫrlagi..."
>
> ("...a false toungue caused his death..."),

while Stanza 125 warns against talking to a "verra mann", who would be likely to reply with his sword. For example, in Egils Saga, Chapters 12 to 22, it is only the skill with which the Hildiríðarsons slander Þórólf Kveld-Úlfsson that persuades King Harald that the latter is up to the very opposite of what empirical evidence and the king's own judgement indicate to be true.

Njáls Saga also offers some illustrations of this. For example, the Njálssons are incited to murder over a couple of *níðvísur*. Then there is Mǫrð Valgerðsson, who uses his "foxy cunning and plausibility"[**] to "insinuate himself

---

[**]Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, trans., Njál's Saga (1960; rpt. Aylesbury; Penguin, 1980), Introduction, p. 15.

into (the Njálssons') confidence"[''] enough to induce them to murder their own foster-brother, a singularly odious ploy to regain the supporters he had lost to the latter. There are countless other examples of ill-meaning, smooth-talking characters throughout the sagas.

Another even more specialized type of wisdom dealt with in the "Hávamál" is runic wisdom. The lengths to which Óðin goes to get the runes are, according to the myth, even more extreme than those needed to get Óðrœrir. The "Hávamál", Stanza 139, relates how he had to hang himself as a sacrifice to the highest of the gods, namely himself, and remain dangling from the world ash tree (henceforth known as "Yggdrasil", "horse of Ygg, alias Óðin") for no less than nine days and nights. The fact that he is prepared to do this speaks for itself, for Óðin is wont to make these gruesome sacrifices in aid of his quest for knowledge (he also gives an eye for a sip of Mímir's well of wisdom). Whether this myth (or indeed any of them) was taken literally by the Norsemen is open to debate; however, the power of the runes was most certainly believed in.

Egils Saga contains three incidents that attest to this. In Chapter 72, Egil visits a home in which the daughter of the house is languishing under a mysterious ailment. On investigation, Egil discovers that a local youth has carved runes to assist her recovery, but due to his inexpertise has made a serious error which has actually made

---

[''] Ibid., Ch. 108, p. 229.

her condition worse. Egil, however, is apparently a proficient rune-master and is able to replace the incorrect runes so that in no time the girl is up and about again. This charm must be similar to the first of the 18 charms alluded to (but not given, of course) in the Rúnatal section of the "Hávamál":

> 146. "Lióð ek þau kann
> er kannat þióðans kona
> ok mannzkis mǫgr;
> hiálp heitir eitt,
> en þat þér hiálpa mun
> við sǫkom ok sorgum
> ok sútom ǥǫrvǫllom."'''
>
> ("I know those spells that king's wives do not know, nor the sons of mankind; the first is called Help, that may aid you in sickness and sorrow and overwhelming grief.")

It later transpires (in Chapter 76) that this same youth and his amateurish rune-carving are at the root of the girl's illness; he has attempted to carve runes to make her fall in love with him, no doubt seeking to copy the charm referred to in Stanza 161 of the "Hávamál:"

> 161. "Þat kann ek it sextánda,
> ef ek vil ins svinna mans
> hafa geð alt ok gaman,
> hugi ek hverfi
> hvítarmri kono
> ok sný ek hennar ǫllum sefa."
>
> ("I know a 16th (spell), if I want the favourable regard of and enjoyment of an intelligent woman (or bondwoman), I change the mind of a white-armed woman and turn all her affection (i.e., towards me).")

However, the youth has got it wrong. As Egil says in the poem he composes on this occasion:

'''"Hávamál", Stanza 146.

"Skalat maðr rúnar rísta,
nema ráða vel kunni,
þat verðr morgum manni,
es of myrkvan staf villisk..."[1]

("A man should not carve runes unless he is well able to understand them, many a man is lost through obscure (rune-)staves...")

The saga writer relates all this as hard fact, even though other supernormal elements, such as Úlf's alleged shape-changing habits are qualified with "Þat var mál manna, at..." ("people said that..."), or some such phrase, revealing that the writer anticipated no surprise or scepticism on the part of the public on this particular point. Runes must therefore have been one of the mystical aspects of of the "Hávamál" that was accepted as part of everyday life by the original saga audience.

The fact that the hero of Egils Saga is a devotee of Óðin may partially explain why there is perhaps a greater consciousness of this deity and the skills associated with him in the "Hávamál". Then again, these aspects may simply have been stressed more because of the personal bias of the person who recorded the saga. Reading between the lines, one might suspect that Snorri goði, for example, also has runic powers in that he is able to cure the wounded in a slightly mysterious way and is miraculously never injured in battle even when a blow reaches him. This could, perhaps, have been made more of, if, for example, the writer of Egils Saga had treated the same material, but the writer of Eyrbyggja Saga

---

[1] Egils Saga, Ch. 72, p. 230.

may have deliberately chosen not to do so.

Kveld-Úlf's family has two distinct and contrasting sides to it. Firstly, the men we have discussed in this chapter, Kveld-Úlf himself, Grím and Egil. These men are ugly and sinister in appearance, with ferocious tempers, but hard working and possessed of sound common sense and penetrating human insight. Then there is the 'heroic' side, the two Þórólfs, one the son of Kveld-Úlf, brother to Grím, and the other son of Grím and brother to Egil. They are both popular, handsome and charming, better suited to a life at court than one on the farm or in the smithy. Their undoubted talents for this kind of lifestyle win them speedy advancement and glory, but they are both killed at an early age, in the case of Þórólf Kveld-Úlfsson precisely because he lacks the sense of his less outstanding kinsmen. The saga writer draws no value judgements from the fact that the branch of the family endowed with the more pedestrian virtues of the "Hávamál", such as verbal skills, industry, judgement and caution (Egil being an artistic exception to the latter), live long lives, achieving secure positions of power in society, while those who seem superficially to have more advantages never live to fulfill their promise. They are simply two contrasting types to be admired equally but in different ways. Both these types, the "fróðr maðr" and the 'hero' are stock figures in the sagas, but Egils Saga provides the clearest illustration of the basic differences between the two as both are represented in one family,

facing the same situations but reacting in completely different ways. Although they are so closely related, there seem to be no points of similarity between the two opposites, which implies that the two outlooks are incompatible with one another: one could not conceive of a wise hero, for example, nor a heroic sage.

Snorri Sturluson, who is widely believed to have written Egils Saga, is known to have been particularly interested in the older religion,[113] and such an interest is certainly in evidence in this saga. Any references to Christianity are striking by their absence, and references to the worship of and belief in the Æsir, such as the sacrificial feast at the high temple at Gaular in Chapter 49, are included without apology. In fact, when Egil and his brother, Þórólf receive preliminary baptism in Chapter 50, the writer seems anxious to excuse this, stressing the fact that they only did it because it was expedient, and that it did not entail actually believing in Christ:

> "...en (þeir) hǫfðu þat at átrúnaði, er þeim var skapfelldast. Þeir Þórólf ok Egill gerðu þat eptir bœn konungs, ok létu prímsignask báðir."[114]
>
> ("...and (they) could believe what was most acceptable to them. Þórólf and Egil did what the king wanted, and accepted preliminary baptism.")

The pre-Christian age is depicted in Egils Saga as a colourful, lively period, in which there was never a dull moment, which is in complete contrast to the way the same age is portrayed in Njáls Saga. This saga, dealt with in the

---

[113]See Introduction, p. 7.
[114]Ibid., Ch. 50, pp. 128-129.

next chapter, could almost be seen as a moral tale, the moral being that the old way of life, shown so attractively in Egils Saga, is prone to senseless brutality and horror.

IV. NJÁL

According to Stefán Einarsson's classification,[115] Njáls Saga belongs to the "Late Classical Period" of 1275 to 1325, and must therefore have been written at least half a century after Egils Saga. It is apparent that the influence of the new faith had by this time penetrated considerably deeper than it had in the earliest saga period (1200-1220), when any Christian aspect was purely cosmetic; in these early sagas it seems as though there had been a clumsy attempt to force some Christian moral into the existing material because the writer felt it ought to have been there, regardless of whether or not it was appropriate. The following is a typical interpolation from Fóstbrœðra Saga, explaining Þorgeir's talent for slaying:

> "Allmáttigr er sá, sem svá snart hjarta ok óhrætt gaf í brjóst Þorgeiri; ok eigi var hans hugprýði af mǫnnum gǫr né honum í brjóst borin, heldr af inum hæsta hǫfuðsmið."[116]
>
> ("It was the Almighty who put into Þorgeir's breast such a gallant and fearless heart; and his courage was not of human making, nor carried in his (i.e., mankind's) breast, rather (it came from) the highest chief builder (God).")

The writers appear to have been confused about what constituted Christian behaviour, for they saw nothing incongruous in ascribing the success of a gory murder to God lending His support to 'righteous' causes, such as revenge. In this connexion, Einarsson notes that:

---

[115] Stefán Einarsson, A History of Icelandic Literature", (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1957).
[116] Fóstbrœðra Saga, Ch. 17, p. 208.

> "In the latter half of the twelfth century, Iceland seems to have been flooded by a wave of religion which culminated about 1200 and didn't begin to recede until the twenties of that century."'''

Since this wave envelops the early saga period, which comes to an end just before the religious zeal begins to recede, it is scarcely surprising that the early sagas have been so heavily interfered with. On the other hand, the painstaking avoidance of any Christian references in Egils Saga, believed to have been written around 1230, i.e., immediately after this movement, could easily be seen as a reaction against such editing. By the late classical period (1275-1325) the need for such heavy-handed didacticism had abated, and with it the urge to react against it. The pressure from the clergy was relaxed, presumably because the Icelanders had a more advanced appreciation of Christianity, which could now be reflected in a subtler way.

The transition from the old to the new religion is a central theme in Njáls Saga. While the seven chapters given to the conversion of Iceland are borrowed from Kristnipáttr they fit naturally into place as an important element of the the transition, in contrast to the earlier sagas in which the superficial Christian insertions jar with the clearly pre-Christian theme.

Most critics agree that Njál represents what the medieval Icelander thought to be a vaguely Christian morality.''' His pacifism is of an essentially different

---

'''A History of Icelandic Literature, p. 96.
'''Lars Lonnroth, in Njál's Saga: a Critical Introduction

nature to that of Snorri goði, for example, who desires peace when it is in his own best interests, while Njál advocates non-violence even when such a course is to his own detriment. In a society where a policy of self-sacrifice is seen as contemptible weakness,'[119] Njál, as one solitary individual at variance with the customs of his society, is doomed to failure, but, significantly, Njáls Saga does not end with the death of its titular hero: this occurs thirty chapters before the conclusion. We observe Njál's values gradually overcoming his heirs and enemies alike, and the saga is not over until Kári and Flosi, having been on a pilgrimage to Rome, have learned forgiveness and "turning the other cheek".'[120]

'[119](cont'd) (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 96, refers to him as a "noble heathen". Allen, in Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls Saga (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), also draws attention to the Christian philosophy of some of the main characters in Njáls Saga, as does Peter Hallberg in The Icelandic Saga, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962).

'[119]See also the reaction to Kjartan's death in Laxdœla Saga.

'[120]Stefán Einarsson, A History of Icelandic Literature, p. 192:

> "In the end, he (Kári) becomes completely reconciled with his adversary Flosi."

Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, trans., Njal's Saga (1960; rpt. Aylesbury: Penguin, 1980), p. 17:

> "It is fitting that Njal's Saga should end with the formal test of Flosi's character through his capacity for hospitality when his enemy Kari deliberately goes to his house for shelter."

But Flosi and Kári are not the only ones to make this awkward step away from the accepted way of life; Allen, in Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls Saga, p. 173, speaks of Hall of Síða's

> "...act of forgiveness (in defying public opinion and refusing compensation for his son), a gesture of great sacrifice and for the nation a new wisdom.... It is

The "heroes" of Njáls Saga are those that modern critics see as representatives of Christianity; Gunnar, Hǫskuld and Njál himself. The "anti-heroes" are those that represent heathendom and the old values expressed in the "Hávamál" at their worst. In the earlier part of the saga, Njál's antagonist Hallgerð plays a major role.[21] Besides being a three-dimensional character in her own right, Hallgerð is also a representative of the ancient Eddic tradition. Fiercely proud of her alleged descent from Sigurð, she gives her sons names from the Sigurð cycle of lays, Grani and Hǫgni, the very names, moreover, that to this day are guaranteed to bring the legend instantly to mind. Her daughter is named Þorgerð after her paternal grandmother,

---

[20](cont'd) the act that shifts the saga itself onto an upward path that leads, eventually, to the reconcilliation between Kári and Flosi and to Kári's marriage with Hildigunnr."

[21]Her quarrel is ostensibly with Bergþóra, but the malice of the *níðvísur* she commissions Sigmund to compose against Njál and his sons, and the insults she personally coins for them show that she has little love for Njál, either, probably resentful of his influence with her husband and irritated by his open disapproval of their marriage. Hallgerð embodies the values that Njál is striving against. Allen, in Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls Saga, p. 142, points out that at the fatal moment when Flosi and Skarphéðin take to abusing each other just as the crucial settlement has been reached, thus dashing the last hopes of peace, Flosi, in using Hallgerð's nickname for Njál, "karlinn skegglausi" ("old beardless" - an aspersion on his manhood), associates himself with the pride and spitefulness of Hallgerð. "By using it, and thereby ensuring that Hildigunn's desire for blood vengeance will be fulfilled, he becomes an agent of these women and for the forces that these women harbour." Hildigunn, it should be pointed out, is another forceful woman in the old Germanic mould. Hallgerð's outlook is thus strongly identified with this ultimate destruction of Njál's plans for peace.

"'...því at hon var komin frá Sigurði
Fáfnisbana í fǫðursætt sína at langfeðgatǫlu...'"[122]

("'...because she was descended from Sigurð
Fáfnir's-slayer on her father's side...'")

She displays all the characteristics of the typical Germanic hero (such as pride, vengefulness, inscrutability, unwillingness to compromise) almost to an exaggerated degree, at times wavering on the brink of caricature. All her friends are men of bad character, which, to the medieval Icelander, would reflect badly on her. Clearly we are meant to see her in a negative light; she is first introduced as a child with "þjófsaugu" ("thief's eyes"), and is seen to degenerate morally as the saga progresses. While there are often alternative, less damning explanations for her behaviour, we are always presented with the most uncharitable account of her actions, that presented by her enemies. Although the allegations, suspicions or rumours about her are not necessarily true, and even seem in conflict with her character, we are led to believe her unmitigatedly guilty of theft, adultery, and all manner of vices. In the latter part of the saga,[123] however, this forceful character simply fades into oblivion as though she and her kind have no place in the new age, and we are left instead with those who are prepared to adapt, such as Kári and Flosi.

---

[122] Njáls Saga, Ch. 14, p. 32.
[123] The last time she appears is in Chapter 91.

One might even see in the figure of Víga-Hrapp (Killer-Hrapp) a criticism of certain "Hávamál" principles, for he represents these in their most negative light. He introduces himself thus:

> "Vinr em ek vina minna, en geld ek þat er illa til mín gert."[1][2][4]
>
> ("I'm a friend to my friends, but pay back those who do me harm.")

This declaration is strikingly reminiscent of the "Hávamál", Stanzas 42 and 43:

> 42. "Vin sínom
> skal maðr vinr vera
> ok gialda giǫf við giǫf;
> hlátr við hlátri
> skyli hǫðar taka,
> en lausung við lygi."
>
> ("To his friends a man should be a friend, and repay gift with gift; people should get (mocking) laughter (in return) for (mocking) laughter, and lying for lies.")
>
> 43. "Vin sínom
> skal maðr vinr vera,
> þeim ok þess vin;
> en óvinar síns
> skyli engi maðr
> vinar vinr vera."
>
> ("To his friends a man should be a friend, to them and also to their friends; but no man should become friends with the friend of his enemy.")

Hrapp, however, places more emphasis on the malice and vindictiveness towards those whom he does not number amongst his friends than on his readiness to serve those who are his friends. He abuses his host's generous hospitality by seducing his daughter, killing his servants, desecrating the earl's temple, and so on: he is, in short, guilty of

---

[1][2][4]Ibid., Ch. 87, p. 209.

"hvertvetna illt" ("every manner of iniquity"). When he has an opportunity to display the loyalty he boasts of, he is not much of a friend, since he wilfully exposes Þráin and his entire crew to the earl's murderous wrath.

Njál's eldest son, Skarphedin, is another clear exponent of the older values, but is not portrayed unsympathetically. He is compelled to settle his affairs according to the ancient code of honour, but is thwarted at every turn by the machinations of his peace-loving father who exploits Skarphedin's pagan honourability for his own anti-pagan ends. The two approaches, the old and the new, are thus brought into conflict with each other, with the result that neither system is able to operate effectively. The frustration on both sides is vividly portrayed: the son is forced by his honour to accept settlements that he feels to be dishonourable, while the father must watch his carefully laid plans to save his sons' lives being foiled by their own impatience. Such a situation is tragic for all concerned.

It would be inappropriate, however, to place too much emphasis on Njál's "Christian" ethic, for his outlook on life owes as much to the "Hávamál" system of values. Furthermore, Steblin-Kamenskij certainly has a point when he says that those of Njál's qualities that modern critics are pleased to see as Christian, such as gentleness, humility and charity, had very little to do with medieval

Christianity.'[25]

Njál is one of the most famous of the "wise" men of the sagas, although I hope to show that his brand of wisdom differs in many respects from that of others. Early on in the saga we note that he is not averse to trickery when dealing with his opponents, which is in agreement with the "Hávamál", Stanzas 42, 45, 46, previously quoted in Chapter I).'[26] Indeed, it is a peculiarity of this saga that all the wise men in it, such as Hrút and Mǫrð Sighvatsson, demonstrate their wisdom by masterminding elaborate and bizzare tricks, frequently resting on a point of law. Njál conforms to the role that Lönnroth'[27] equates with the role of Hár (or Óðin) in mythology, that of the wise counsellor. He is frequently seen dispensing good advice that usually turns out well for those who follow it. There is one period in which he bestows advice that fails to lead to a satisfactory end, but we are clearly meant to see this as deliberate so that the law will be reformed according to his reccomendations, which include the creation of a new chieftaincy for his foster-son, Hǫskuld, who needs it before he can marry the woman of his choice. Such use of cunning is characteristic of the "Hávamál's" "fróðr maðr". As the saga

---

'[25]M. I. Steblin-Kaminskij, The Saga Mind, trans. Kenneth H. Ober (Odense: Odense University Press, 1973), Ch. 5, pp. 113-114.

'[26]pp. 15 & 27. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, in Njál's Saga: a Literary Masterpiece, trans. and ed. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 163, also acknowledges Njál's early fidelity to the "Hávamál" values.

'[27]Njáls Saga, a Critical Introduction, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 63.

progresses, Njál becomes increasingly less an exponent of the old pagan cunning, but he never quite loses sight of the old values. Announcing his decision to stay and burn in the house with his sons, Njál says that he has no wish to outlive his heirs; his motives at this point are mixed, but all can be traced to a "Hávamál" attitude. His words are:

> "'Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at em ek maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skǫmm.'"[12]

> ("'I don't want to go outside, for I am an old man and hardly able to avenge my sons, and I don't want to live with shame.'")

Here we see him conscious of his duty to avenge his kinsmen and lamenting the fact that he is too enfeebled to perform this duty, not, we note, filled with a Christian desire to forgive his enemies. His behaviour in the hour of his death is obviously designed to earn him the "dómr um dauðan hvern" refered to in "Hávamál", Stanza 77,[13] since he is most anxious to draw attention to his unflinchingness. He is just as concerned with being seen to die courageously as Skarphéðin is. There is also an element of Stanza 50 here:

> 50. "Hrørnar þǫll,
> sú er stendr þorpi á,
> hlýrar henne bǫrkr né barr;
> svá er maðr,
> sá er manngi ann;
> hvat skal hann lengi lifa?"

> ("The young fir perishes if it stands in an unsheltered place, neither bark nor needles cover it; so is the man that nobody loves; why should he live long?")

His friends and family gone, why indeed should Njál live

---

[12] Njáls Saga, Ch. 129, p. 330.
[13] Quoted in Ch. 2, p. 53.

long?

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson[130] remarks:

> "...according to Njála, Snorri goði was the wisest man among those who were not prescient. The wisdom of Njál, however, had more strands to it for he was also prescient."

This implication that Njál's prescience is a mere bonus to his other talents is open to debate, however, if one analyses his "wise" acts carefully. The wisdom of "fróðir" men in other sagas who follow the ethics of the "Hávamál," such as Snorri goði, resides in their shrewd psychological insight. It is their understanding of human nature that enables them to manipulate others, a supreme example of this being Snorri goði's ability to make Styr change sides in mid-battle with a few well-chosen words. They can predict other people's reactions or the outcome of a particular situation because of this understanding, but Njál's ability to foretell the outcome of a given situation is rooted elsewhere; in his clairvoyancy. He is able to predict men's actions and reactions, not because he understands them, but because his visions have shown him what will happen. Compare, for example, Njál's prescient warning against marrying Hallgerð to Þórarin's or Hrút's common sense ones. This is Njál's reaction to Gunnar's engagement:

> "Gunnar spurði, hvat hann fyndi til, at honum þótti slíkt svá óráðligt. 'Af henni mun standa allt it illa, er hon kemr austr hingat,' segir Njáll. 'Aldri skal hon spilla okkru vinfengi,' segir Gunnarr. 'Þat mun þó svá nær liggja,' segir Njáll, 'en þó munt þú jafnan bœta fyrir henni.'"[131]

---

[130] Njál's Saga: a Literary Masterpiece, p. 158.
[131] Njáls Saga, Ch. 33, p. 87.

("Gunnar asked what the reason was, that he thought it so inadvisable. 'All manner of ills will arise because of her when she comes east,' said Njál. 'She'll never spoil our friendship,' said Gunnar. 'It'll come close to that, even though you'll make up for her.'")

This is Þórarin's comment on an earlier proposal:

"'Eigi er nú þat, sem mælt er' segir Þórarinn, 'at þú látir þér annars víti at varnaði, ok var hon gipt manni, ok réð hon þeim bana.'"[132]

("'It's not true on this occasion what people say,' said Þórarin, 'that you take warning from the experience of others; she was married to a man and plotted his death.")

The substance of the two pieces of advice is much the same, but whereas Þórarin speaks from a knowledge of Hallgerð's character and that of her shifty foster-father, Njál reaches the same conclusion without having to take any of these factors into consideration. On other occasions, Njál's advice sounds more like the kind of dire warning one might expect in a folk or fairy tale than a piece of sound advice. Consider for example, his words to Gunnar in Chapter 55:

"'Veg þú aldri meir í inn sama knérunn en um sinn ok rjúf aldri sætt þá er góðir menn gera meðal þín ok annarra, ok þó sízt á því máli.'"[133]

("'Never kill more than once in the same family, and never break an agreement that good men make between you and others, although this is less important.'")

He can not have reached this conclusion by rational processes. He underlines this by telling Gunnar in the same breath that he knows how he himself will die, another of his many prophesies that defy reason, since he says that the

---

[132]Ibid., Ch. 13, p. 42.
[133]Ibid., Ch. 55, p. 139.

manner of his death will be "'...þat, sem allir munu sízt ætla,'"[134] ("'...what everyone would least expect'").

On most occasions Njál exercises this non-rational gift of his in preference to weighing the known facts of a case and reaching an informed conclusion, which is what other wise men of the sagas do. Nor can it be claimed that this second sight is his in addition to superior intellectual powers, for on some occasions Njál reveals himself to be hopelessly lacking in human insight. His advice to his furious sons to take no action while they are being disgraced in the community, for example, while superficially logical in itself, fails because he does not take their nature and social conditioning into account.

His adoption of Hǫskuld Þráinsson, designed to keep the peace, is a disastrous move from the beginning, firstly as his own sons were bitter enemies of Þráin's, and secondly because Hǫskuld himself transpires to be an irritatingly saintly and precocious child. Although this is not explicitly stated, from Njál's close affinity with and obvious preference for the boy, who is much more like him than any of his own sons, we may deduce that for many years Hǫskuld is held up as a shining example to the Njálssons by their father. Njál goes to inordinate lengths to have this usurper promoted above them to chieftainship, and is even tactless enough to tell them:

"'...mér þætti betra at hafa látit tvá sonu

---

[134]Ibid., Ch. 55, p. 139.

mína ok væri Hǫskuldr á lífi.'"[135]

("'...I would think it better to have lost two of my sons and have Hǫskuld still alive.'")

One can well imagine just how infuriating this must eventually become for them, and why they are predisposed to accept rather implausible ill reports of Hǫskuld and why they kill him, proving that:

51. "Eldi heitari
brennr með illom vinom
friðr fimm daga;
en þá sloknar
er inn sétti kømr,
ok versnar allr vinskapr."[136]

("(A relationship) between false friends glows beautifully, warmer than fire, for five days; but it is extinguished when the sixth day comes, and the friendship deteriorates completely.")

While Hǫskuld may have been quite sincere in his friendship toward his fosterbrothers, theirs can not have been heartfelt.

Even the manner of his family's death can be attributed to Njál's lack of psychological insight into his attackers. He decides that they will defend themselves from inside the house, although the more realistic Skarphéðin warns him what the enemies are capable of:

"'Gunnar sóttu heim þeir hǫfðingjar, er svá váru vel at sér, at heldr vildu frá hverfa en brenna hann inni. En þessir munu sœkja oss með eldi, ef þeir megu eigi annan veg, því at þeir munu allt til vinna, at yfir taki við oss. Munu þeir þat ætla, sem eigi er ólíkligt, at þat muni þeira bani, ef oss dregr undan. Em ek ok ófúss at láta svæla mik sem melrakka í greni.'"[137]

---

[135]Ibid., Ch. 111, p. 281.
[136]"Hávamál", Stanza 51.
[137]Njáls Saga, Ch. 128, p. 326.

("'The chieftains that attacked Gunnar at his home were so honourable that they would have rather left than burn him inside. But these men would attack us with fire if there were no other way, because they are determined to overcome us. They must think that it would be the death of them if we got away, which isn't unlikely. And I'm not prepared to let myself be choked to death like a fox in its hole.'")

He is of course right, and Njál is again tragically misguided in expecting too much of others and counting on them being as he thinks they ought to be rather than seeing them as they are. As if to highlight Njál's folly, his refusal to follow Skarphedin's advice is juxtaposed with Flosi's remarks that if they did just that the attackers would have a hard time:

"'Nú skulu vér at hyggja, hvat þeir taka til ráðs, því at mér lízk svá, ef þeir standa úti fyrir, sem vér munim þá aldri sótta geta... En þat afráð munu vér gjalda, at margr mun eigi kunna frá at segja, hvárir sem sigrask.'"[128]

("Now we should watch closely what course they take, because it seems to me that if they take their stand outside we'll never defeat them...We'll have

---

[128]Ibid., Ch. 128, pp. 325-326. That a man could possibly be stupid enough not to see that Skarphedin is right is so incredible that Sveinsson, in Njál's Saga, a Literary Masterpiece, (see p. 173) refuses to accept it, and postulates a theory to explain Njál's behaviour. This theory, in brief, is that, secretly realizing the truth of his son's words, Njál merely invents the excuse for staying indoors that the others are most likely to understand, since they would find his true motives totally incomprehensible. He has known all along that he is doomed, a fact which both Flosi and Skarphedin remind us of at this point, and instead of desperately trying to avert the inevitable as he has been doing for so long, Njál has finally come to terms with his fate and thereby found inner peace. By going to his end willingly, Njál transcends his doom, transforming what the others see as defeat into a triumph. Such a line of reasoning is, of course, all too familiar to the student of Weimar Classicism, but to accredit it to a medieval saga writer, albeit a sophisticated one, seems to me anachronistic.

to pay heavily, and many of us won't live to tell who won.'")

There is one further piece of "Hávamál" advice that Njál and his family would have been better to heed;

134. "Ráðomk þér, Loddfáfnir,
en þú ráð nemir,
nióta mundo ef þú nemr,
þér muno góð ef þú getr:
at három þul
hlæðu aldregi;
opt er gott þat er gamlir kveða;
opt ór skǫrpom belg
skilin orð koma,
þeim er hangir með hám
ok skollir með skrám
ok váfir með vilmǫgom."[139]

("Be advised, Loddfáfnir, to take this advice; you'll profit from it if you take it, you'll benefit from it if you take it: never scoff at a grey-haired sage; often what the old say is good; skillful words often come from ashrivelled skin, (Gering:[140] "gemeint is der Mund des alten Mannes.") those that hang with the skins and (hang with) the parchments and wave (in the breeze) with the (animal) entrails.")[141]

Shortly before the burning, an old woman gives them a warning:

"Kerling var sú ein at Bergþórshváli, er Sæunn hét; hon var fróð at morgu ok framsýn, en þá var hon gǫmul mjǫk, ok kǫlluðu Njálssynir hana gamalœra, er hon mælti mart, en þó gekk þat mart eptir... Kerling mælti: 'Þessi arfasáta mun tekin ok kveyktr við eldr, þá er Njáll er inni brenndr ok Bergþóra, fóstra mín, ok berið þér hana á vatn,' segir hon, 'eða brennið hana sem skjótast'... Kerling klifaði allt sumarit um arfsátuna, at inn skyldi bera, en þó fórsk þat ávallt fyrir."[142]

---

[139]"Hávamál", Stanza 134.
[140]B. Sijmons and Hugo Gering, Die Lieder der Edda (Halle: Buchhandlug des Waisenhauses, 1927), III, pp. 79-160.
[141]Gering, Ibid.:"...enthalten einen Scherz des Dichter der, während er in Z. 6 das Wort 'belgr' in übertragenem Sinne gebraucht hat, jetzt, um eine komische Wirkung zu erzielen, es in seiner eigentlichen Bedeutung verwendet."
[142]Njáls Saga, Ch. 124, p. 320.

("There was an old woman at Bergþórshvál, who was called Sæun; she was wise about many things and prescient, but she was very old by then and the Njálssons called her senile because she talked a lot, although many things went as she had said... The old woman said: 'This heap of chickweed will be taken to kindle the fire when Njál is burnt inside, and Bergþóra, my foster-daughter. Take it away to the water', she said, 'or burn it at once'... The old woman nagged them about removing the pile of chickweed all that summer, but it was never done.")

Sæunn's prediction comes true; that very plant is used to burn them all.

Njál's "gift" for soothsaying is often extremely useful. As we have seen, it underlies much of the advice he gives. His son Helgi also finds this inherited talent of value in the Orkney Isles, where he is able to inform Sigurd Jarl that his steward has been killed in Scotland and that the Scots are preventing this news from getting through. This earns him and his brothers a good reputation and the earl's favour, not to mention the gift of a good ship and crew. Nevertheless, Njál's prescience is more of a curse than a blessing. He is haunted throughout the saga by grisly visions of his own death and that of all the people he loves:

> "'Undarliga sýnisk mér nú. Ek þykkjumsk sjá um alla stufuna, ok þykki mér sem undan sé gaflveggirnir báðir, en blóðugt allt ok matrinn.'"[44]
>
> ("'I can see a strange vision. I seem to see the whole of the room, and it seems to me as though both the gable walls are down, and everything and the food is bloody.'")

Such foreknowledge is a constant, worrisome concern for

---

[44]Ibid., Ch. 127, p. 342.

Njál, and makes him a tragic, Cassandra-like figure.

Many other instances of psychic foresight are similarly in the form of gruesome apparitions. For example, in Chapter 41, Þord sees his own fetch in the form of a goat lying in a pool of blood, portending his imminent death. As he knows that there is nothing he can do to avert his fate, it could be argued that his last hours would have been happier without the anticipation. The witchride in Chapter 125 is an horrific vision so distressing that it causes the man who witnesses it to pass out. Flosi and Ketil also acknowledge that foreknowledge of disaster is of little benefit, for when they are forewarned of the deaths of several of their men, they unhesitatingly decide to keep it from those concerned:

> "'Þat er hugboð mitt,' segir Ketill, 'at þeir muni allir feigir, er kalladir váru. Sýnisk mér þat ráð, at þenna draum segi vit engum at svá búnu.' Flosi kvað svá vera skyldu."'[44]
>
> ("'I have a feeling that they are all doomed ('fey'), those who were called here. It seems advisable to me that we don't tell anyone here this dream.' Flosi said that it would be so.")

All these examples and many more besides'[45] illustrate the truth of "Hávamál", Stanzas 55 and (particularly) 56:

> 55. "Meðalsnotr
> skyli manna hverr,

'[44]Ibid., Ch. 133, p. 348.

'[45]In Chapter 23, Hǫskuld has a portentious dream; In Chapter 62 Gunnar's death looms before him in a dream; in Chapter 112, Hildigunn learns of Hǫskuld's death in a dream; in Chapter 134, the dream of her sons' disgrace makes Yngvild weep. Many other sagas, notably Laxdœla Saga and Gísla Saga feature dream visions of the respective heroine's and hero's unhappy fates, knowledge they would prefer not to have.

æva til snotr sé;
þvíat snotrs mannz hiarta
verðr sialdan glatt,
ef sá er alsnotr er á."

("Every man should be moderately wise, never too wise; for a wise man's heart is seldom glad if he has knowledge of everything.")

56. "Meðalsnotr
skyli manna hverr,
æva snotr sé;
ørlǫg sín
viti engi fyrir;
þeim er sorgalausastr sefi."

("Every man should be moderately wise, never too wise; no one should see his own fate in advance, those sleep freest from worry.")

In Njáls Saga, then, we see the main character still essentially guided by the old system of values expressed in the "Hávamál", but, as we have seen, he seeks compromise and peace to an extent which is more compatible with the precepts of Christianity. This is far from being a complete break, however, for the old "Hávamál" values evidently retained a firm hold on Njál and his successors even after Christianity had been embraced. We note, for example, that Njál's ethical stance regarding the use of trickery against his opponents is that of the "Hávamál" rather than that of the new religion, which forbids deceit. Even in his hour of death, while looking forward to the Christian life hereafter, Njál imperils his soul by harbouring feelings of murderous revenge which, according to Christian teaching, are sinful. In this critical moment, Njál's personal relationship to the Almighty is of less importance to him than the bonds of kinship and friendship spoken of in the

"Hávamál".

Prescience, as it does in Njáls Saga, also plays particularly large role in Laxdœla Saga, where the pre-Christian values expressed in the "Hávamál" are by no means as strongly condemned as they implicitly are in Njáls Saga, the idea that foreknowledge is a curse rather than an advantage is treated in a very similar way in both sagas. Thus, the outlooks of the two writers differ in many respects, the one seeing everything about the old values in a most pessimistic light, viewing Christianity as the only hope for society, and the other being more concerned with secular values that are independent of those in the "Hávamál" and in Christianity. Nevertheless, both are agreed on the accuracy of the "Hávamál" on this point, as we shall see by examining the figure of Gest Oddleifsson in the next chapter.

V. GEST ODDLEIFSSON AND ÓLÁF PÁ

Gest Oddleifsson is another famous example of a wise and prescient man. He appears as such in Laxdœla Saga and in Landnámabók. The initial description of him is similar to that of Njál, but the wording in Gest's case places more emphasis on his wisdom than his prescience:

Njál:

"...vitr var hann ok forspár."[45]

("...he was wise and prescient.")

Gest:

"Hann var hǫfðingi mikill ok spekingr at viti, framsýnn um marga hluti..."[46]

("He was a great chieftain and sage, prescient in many ways...")

"Hann var manna vitrastr, svá at hann sá fyrir ørlǫg manna."[47]

("He was the wisest man who saw into the future.")

Gest's prescience plays a lesser role than Njál's; often we feel that the incidents of his clairvoyancy are included as entertaining diversions rather than significant parts of the action. His ability to name all Óláf's sons without having seen them, for example, serves no apparent role except to impress with his ability to do this.

It could be argued that his foresight is relegated to a secondary role merely because Gest is truly wise in the "Hávamál" sense as well as prescient; like Njál, he can

---

[45] Njáls Saga, Ch. 20, p. 57.
[46] Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 33, p. 87.
[47] Njáls Saga, Ch. 103, p. 267.

predict terrible events, but unlike him has the sense to accept what he knows to be inevitable rather than trying to avert it. His prophesies are made, and then almost forgotten about until many years later they come true, whereupon the narrator makes a point of reminding the reader that what has happened is a fulfillment of Gest's prophesy. For example, in Chapter 22, Gest makes the cryptic comment that:

> "'...koma mun þar, at skemmra mun í milli bústaða okkarra Ósvífrs, ok mun okkr þá hægt um tal, ef okkr er þá leyft at talask við.'"[116]
>
> ("'...the time will come when there will be a shorter distance between our homes, mine and Ósvíf's, and it will be easier for us to talk, if we have leave to talk.'")

Not until Chapter 66, in which both Osvíf and Gest die and are buried together is this brought up again:

> "Kom nú fram spásagan Gests, at skemmra var í milli þeira en þá, er annarr var á Barðastrǫnd, en annarr í Sælingsdal."[117]
>
> ("Now Gest's prophesy came true, that there was a shorter distance between them than when one was at Barðastrǫnd and the other at Sælingsdal.")

Again, this is not really of significance to the action of the saga, and seems to be included merely to amaze the reader, in contrast to the prophesies in Njáls Saga, in which Njál's obsessive attempts to avert the course of destiny keep the prediction very much in the foreground. Gest, not being personally involved in the awful fates he foresees,[118] finds it easier to preserve the critical

---

[116] Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 33, p. 91.
[117] Ibid., Ch. 66, p. 197.
[118] Such as Bolli and Kjartan's deaths at each other's hands, or Guðrún's ill-starred matrimonial career.

distance necessary for rational behaviour. Nevertheless, the burden of foreknowledge weighs as heavily on Gest as it does on Njál. After impressing everyone with his psychic ability in Chapter 33,

> "Þá mælti Óláfr: 'Eigi má ofsǫgum segja frá vitsmúnum þínum, Gestr, er þú kennir ósénna menn.'"[152]
>
> ("Then Óláf said: 'Your wisdom cannot be exaggerated, Gest, for you recognize (hítherto) unseen men.'")

the less enviable side of his gift is revealed:

> "En nǫkkuru síðar ríðr Þórðr inn lági, sonr hans, hjá honum ok mælti: 'Hvat berr nú þess við, faðir minn, er þér hrynja tár?' Gestr svarar: 'þarfleysa er at segja þat, en eigi nenni ek at þegja yfir því, er á þínum dǫgum mun fram koma; en ekki kemr mér at óvǫrum, þótt Bolli standi yfir hǫvuðsvǫrðum Kjartans, ok hann vinni sér þá ok hǫfuðbana, ok er þetta illt at vita um svá mikla ágætismenn.'"[153]
>
> ("A little later, Þorð the short, his son, rode up to him and said: 'what is troubling you, my father, that you are shedding tears?' Gest answered: 'There's no point in telling you this, but I can't keep quiet over something that will happen in your time; but it would not come as a surprise to me, if Bolli stands over Kjartan's body and wins death for himself from it, and this is bad to know about such very promising men.'")

Here we see again that foreknowledge brings sorrow, just as the "Hávamál" says in Stanza 56:

> 56. "Meðalsnotr
> skyli manna hverr,
> æva til snotr sé;
> ørlǫg sín
> viti engi fyrir;
> þeim er sorgalausastr sefi."
>
> ("Every man should be moderately wise, never too wise; no one should know his fate in advance;

---

[152]Ibid., Ch. 33, p. 92.
[153]Ibid., Ch. 33, p. 92.

those (that don't) sleep freest from care.")

Even though his own immediate family is not involved, Gest is moved to tears. His decision not to warn Óláf of his kinsmen's futures is an implicit acknowledgement that foreknowledge can serve no useful purpose whatsoever and that one is better off without it. He also seems reluctant to give Guðrún his somewhat depressing interpretation of her dreams, that she will be widowed no less than four times in her life, and she has to insist that he give her the "truth" as he understands it rather than wishful interpretations.

Óláf pá ("the peacock"), as his name proclaims, is renowned mostly for his flamboyant appearance, this being quite consistent with the Icelandic ideal of manliness; Stanza 49 of the "Hávamál" seems to mean that clothes make the man:

> 49. "Váðir mínar
> gaf ek velli at
> tveim trémǫnnom:
> rekkar þat þóttuz
> er þeir rift hǫfðo;
> neiss er nǫkkviðr halr."[1]

> ("I gave my clothes to two wooden men in a field: They were thought warriors when they had linen clothes; the naked man is covered in shame.")

---

[1] Stanza 61, however, states another view:

> 61. "Þveginn ok mettr
> ríði maðr þingi at,
> þótt hann sét væddr til vel;
> skúa ok bróka skammiz engi maðr;
> né hest in heldr;
> þótt hann hafit góðan."

> ("Washed and well fed ride to the þing, though one may think too much of one's clothing; shoes and breeches shame no one; nor his horse either; even if it isn't a good one.")

In his youth Óláf seems to be developing as a romanticised hero, such as Gunnar in Njáls Saga and Þórólf in Egils Saga: "Óláfr var afbragð flestra barna,"[188] ("Óláf was the most excellent child"); later he shows exceptional promise as a young man, and his unequalled prowess and accomplishments earn him the veneration of foreign monarchs:[189]

> "...þau (Haraldr & Gunnhildr) kǫlluðu engan mann vænligra hafa komit af Íslandi á þeira dǫgum."[190]
>
> ("...they said that no more promising man had come from Iceland in their days.")

As the son of an enigmatic foreign princess, Óláf's background is also rather exotic and adds to his glamourous aura.

Óláf's skillful handling of the potentially dangerous situation in Ireland illustrates the truth of "Hávamál", Stanza 10:

> 10. "Byrði betri
> berrat maðr brauto at
> en sé manvit mikit;
> auði betra
> þikkir þat í ókunnom stað;
> slíkt er válaðs vera."
>
> ("A man can carry no better burden abroad with him than wisdom; it is esteemed better than wealth in unknown places; likewise to a wretched man.")

He has taken the trouble to inform himself of Irish law and language, and his first attempt to defend his property is a

---

[188] Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 13, p. 27.
[189] The Icelandic sagas are wont to portray the reception of Icelanders by foreign courts as wildly enthusiastic, probably as an expression of national pride, although Icelandic skalds were considered something of a status symbol.
[190] Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 21, p. 53.

legal one; he does not resort to implicit physical threats until this fails. Armed reinforcements are brought against the Norseman and the outlook seems discouraging:

> "En er skipverjar Óláfs sjá mikit riddararlið ríða til þeira, ok var it frœknligsta, þá þagna þeir því at þeim þótti mikill liðsmunr við at eiga."[15]
>
> ("And when Óláf's crew see a great cavalry riding towards them, and that it was the most valiant-looking, they fell silent, because the odds against them seemed great.")

Nevertheless, Óláf doesn't panic and follows instead the advice of "Hávamál", Stanza 7:

> 7. "...eyrom hlýðir
> en augom skoðar;
> svá nýsiz fróðra hverr fyrir".
>
> ("...the ears listen, the eyes glance around; thus every wise man looks about him.")

Before ruining things by acting rashly, Óláf picks up the vital information (probably by eavesdropping on the Irishmen) that this is his own grandfather approaching. When King Mýrkjartan arrives, Óláf does not immediately try to save his skin by declaring their kinship: this information he has to have coaxed out of him. Instead he relies on his own qualities to win the confidence of the king, removing any suspicion that Óláf is extracated from his predicament by mere luck.

As Óláf matures, he settles into the Óðin-like role of "wise counsellor":[16]

---

[15]Ibid., Ch. 21, p. 56.
[16]Definition from: Lars Lönnroth, Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 63.

"Síðan drífa menn at Óláfi ok gerðisk hann hǫfðingi mikill'[160]

("Then men thronged around Óláf, and he became a great chieftain.")

"Óxu nú mjǫk metorð Óláfs; báru til þess margir hlutir; var Óláf manna vinsælstr, því at þat er hann skipti sér af um mál manna, þá undu allir vel við sinn hlut."'[161]

("Now Óláf's reputation spread; many factors contributed to this; Óláf was the most popular man, because when he arbitrated in a case, then everyone was content with his lot.")

Like Snorri goði, Óláf knows the value of strong allies, and keeps his friends' loyalty with magnanimous gift-giving and hospitality, just as the "Hávamál" suggests.'[162] Óláf's advice, in contrast to Njál's, is usually perceptive and considered. For example, in Chapter 38, he does not simply tell his brother Þorleik to leave Iceland because their powerful uncle Hrút is offended with him. He has obviously thought the matter through, considering, for example, where

---

'[160]Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 24, p. 66.
'[161]Ibid., Ch. 24, p. 68.
'[162]Stanzas 42 and 44:

42. "Vin sínom
skal maðr vinr vera
ok gialda gjǫf við gjǫf..."

("A man shoud be a friend to his friends,
and repay gift with gift...")

44. "Veiztu, ef þú vin átt,
þann er þú vel trúir,
ok vil þeim gott geta,
geði skaltu við þann blanda
ok gjǫfum skipta, fara at finna opt."

("Know this, if you have a friend,
one that you trust well, and want to get some
benefit from them, you should share your
thoughts with him and give him
gifts, meet with him often.")

Þorleik could go and what kind of a life he could make for himself abroad. He also realizes how loath Þorleik will be to leave behind his beloved son Bolli, never to see him again, and, rather than overlooking these details, he finds acceptable solutions before broaching the subject with the man whose life his advice is about to affect radically. His instincts are remarkably sound, his insights so penetrating that one has to be reminded that this man is not actually prescient:

> "(Óláf:)'...Nú er þat hugboð mitt, en eigi vil ek þess spá, at vér frændr ok Laugamenn berim allsendis gæfu til um vár skipti.'"[66]
>
> ("(Óláf:)'...I have the idea, although I don't want prophesy this, that we kinsmen and the men of Laugar will not have any luck from our dealings (with each other).'")

Óláf's aquisition of Hjarðaholt brings to mind Stanza 83 of the "Hávamál":

> 83. "...magran mar kaupa,
> en mæki saurgan,
> heima hest feita,
> en hund á búi."
>
> ("...buy a thin mare, a dirty sword, fatten the horse at home, the dog in your household.")

This stanza is not necessarily to be interpreted on a strictly literal basis any more than, say, "don't count your chickens before they're hatched" is to be taken as referring exclusively to poultry. The underlying message is that it pays to buy superficially imperfect wares, presumably at a bargain price, and by using a bit of effort restore them to a good condition. Víga-Hrapp (whose obnoxious character was

---

[66] Laxdœla saga, Ch. 39, p. 112.

discussed in Chapter III) dies in Chapter 17, whereupon he becomes even more of a nuisance:

> "En svá illr sem hann var viðreignar, þá er hann lifði, þá jók nú miklu við, er hann dauðr, því at hann gekk mjǫk aptr. Svá segja menn, at hann deyddi flest hjón sín í aptrgǫngunni; hann gerði mikinn ómaka þeim flestum er í nánd bjuggu; var eyddr bœrinn á Hrappsstǫðum."[16]
>
> ("And as bad as he was to have dealings with when he was alive, this increased greatly when he was dead, for he did a lot of haunting. People say that he came back and killed most of his servants; he did great harm to most of those who lived nearby; the farm at Hrappstad was (soon) deserted.")

His widow is forced to flee her home, and their son's attempts to farm the land drive him to insanity and death. Attempts to lay the ghost by moving the body are only partly successful: "eptir þetta nemask af heldr aptrgǫngur Hrapps,"[17] ("after that, Hrapp's haunting slackened off somewhat"). Under these circumstances, the estate is obviously uninhabitable, but Óláf sees the potential of the land and decides to buy it, offering a mere three marks (thus outdoing Snorri's coup when he bought Bǫrk out of Helgafell for 60 pieces of silver).

> "Var þat at kaupi með þeim, at Óláfr skyldi reiða þrjár merkr silfrs fyrir lǫndin, en þat var þó ekki jafnaðarkaup, því at þat váru víðar lendur ok fagrar ok mjǫk gagnauðgar; miklar laxveiðar ok selveiðar fylgðu þar."[18]
>
> ("The sale was decided on between them, that Óláf should pay three marks of silver for the lands, although that was not a fair price, because they were extensive and lovely lands, and very productive; abundant salmon fishing and seal hunting territory went with it.")

---

[16] Ibid., Ch. 17, p. 39.
[17] Ibid., Ch. 17, p. 40.
[18] Ibid., Ch. 24, p. 67.

This low price is agreed on because "Þorkel...sá þat, at honum var betri einn kráka í hendi en tvær í skogi,"[165] ("Þorkel...saw that a bird (literally, "crow")in the hand was better for him than two in the bush (literally "woods")"). Before long, Hrapp returns to menace Óláf's farmhands, who threaten to leave, but Óláf solves the problem by having the body exhumed, cremated and the ashes scattered at sea.

> "Héðan frá verðr engum manni mein at aptrgǫngu Hrapps."[166]
>
> ("From that time forth, no man was harmed by Hrapp's haunting.")

Óláf is one of the most principled (in today's sense) of the wise men of the sagas, even more so than Njál, who, despite his saintly reputation among critics, often resorted to legal trickery. Óláf is never seen to come into conflict with others or to resort to underhandedness. Nevertheless, he is not unwilling to profit from what might be considered slightly immoral. For example, on his deathbed, Hǫskuld, Óláf's father, tries to leave an equal share of his estate to each of his sons, including the illegitimate Óláf. His somewhat envious half-brother Þorleik refuses[167] on the grounds that:

> "'...hefir Óláf ærit fé áðr; hefir þú, faðir, þar marga þína muni til gefna ok lengi mjǫk misjafnat með oss brœðrum; mun ek eigi upp gefa þann

---

[165]Ibid., Ch. 24, p. 67.
[166]Ibid., Ch. 24, p. 69.
[167]He is legally entitled to do this; his father requires the permission of his legitimate heirs to leave anything more than the legal maximum, 12 ounces of silver, to anyone else, including his illegitimate offspring.

sóma með sjálfvild, er ek em til borinn."[170]

("...Óláf has enough money already; you, Father, have given him a great ammount of yours, and have treated us brothers very unfairly for a long time; I will not of my own free will give up that honour I was born to.")

Not to be thwarted, Hǫskuld determines to give Óláf as much as the law allows (see footnote no. 159.), 12 *aurar*. Þorleik cannot object to this and gives his consent, little suspecting that his father secretly means the value of 12 gold *aurar*, whereas in this context the *aurar* are assumed to be silver. Thus Óláf gets eight times the inheritance that he is strictly entitled to, and, when his half-brother protests, refuses to part with it:

"...því at þú leyfðir þvílika fégjǫf við vitni; mun ek til þess hætta, hvárt ek fæ haldit."[171]

("...because you agreed to the gift of such a sum in front of witnesses; I will run the risk of whether I can hold on to the money.")

As Óláf is generally most anxious to avoid confrontation, this seems to illustrate Stanza 40 of the "Hávamál":

"Fiár sína,
er fengit hefr,
skylit maðr þǫrf þola;
opt sparir leiðom
þats hefir liúfom hugat;
mart gengr verr en varir."

("When a man has made his fortune he should not suffer want; often one saves for an enemy what was intended for a loved one; much goes worse than expected.")

Óláf, who is elsewhere shown to be generous, considers it quite acceptable to take whatever is offered him. Nor

---

[170]Ibid., Ch. 26, p. 72.
[171]Ibid., Ch. 26, p. 72.

does Óláf seem to object to his mother's proposal to sacrifice herself for the sake of financing his expedition by marrying Þorbjǫrn skrjúpr. Clearly this is her only reason for considering marriage, but Óláf, rather callously, "bað móður sína eina ráða,"[1'3] ("told his mother to do as she saw fit"). This may seem distastefully close to selling his own mother, but then again, the "Hávamal" does not advise looking gift horses in the mouth, and it must be said that from an unpromising start in life as an "ambáttarsonr"[1'3] ("concubine's son"), Óláf comes a long way. He is wise enough, in the self-centred moral world of the "Hávamál", to know when he can take advantage of a situation.

The idea of moderation in all things recurs several times in the first section of the "Hávamál". Stanza 19 suggests moderation rather than temperence:

> 19. "Haldit maðr á keri,
> drekki þó at hófi miǫð..."
>
> ("Do not abstain from the goblet, but drink mead in moderation...")

Stanza 64 advises moderation in the use of force:

> 64. "Ríki sitt
> skyli ráðsnotra hverr
> í hófi hafa..."
>
> ("Every sensible man should use his might in moderation...")

Stanza 55 even advocates moderation in wisdom itself:

[1'3]Ibid., Ch. 20, p. 50.

[1'3]A stigma he never quite loses. Even as the respected son of a now wealthy and powerful man, Kjartan has to tolerate being reminded of this by the Norwegian princess Ingibjǫrg (Ch. 43).

55. "Meðalsnotr
skyli manna hverr,
æva til snotr sé..."

("Every man should be moderately wise, never too wise...")

The message is that too much of anything, even a good thing such as wisdom, is bad. Óláf provides an illustration of this, for one of the only criticisms that could be levelled against him is that he is perhaps too much a "samningarmaðr" ("peaceable man"), too reluctant for confrontation of any kind. In itself, this is a fine quality, and he is acclaimed for playing this role in society. In his domestic life, however, he sometimes concedes too readily just for the sake of peace. Much against his better judgement, he gives his consent on more than one occasion to ill-advised schemes that end in disaster. For example, his instinctive reaction against the proposed marriage between his daughter Þuríð and the Norwegian viking Geirmund gnýr ("the noisy") is obviously correct, yet he lets his self-willed wife Þorgerð (daughter of Egil Skallagrímsson) overrule his initial rejection of Geirmund's proposal:

"Eigi skal þetta gera í móti þér, heldr en annat, þótt ek væra fúsari at gipta Þuríði öðrum manni''[176]

("This won't be done against your wishes any more than at other times, although I would be more eager to marry Þuríð to another man.")

As Óláf suspects, "ekki var mart um í samförum þeira Geirmundr ok Þuríðar"[177] ("they didn't have much of a

---

[176]Ibid., Ch. 29, p. 80.
[177]Ibid., Ch. 30, p. 80.

relationship"), and it ends with Geirmund abandoning his wife and child without maintenance. To repay this slight, Þuríd steals his favourite sword, refusing to return it. Piqued, Geirmund puts a curse on the weapon, a curse which is eventually fulfilled by Bolli's murder of Kjartan.

The episode with Geirmund could also be seen as an illustration of "Hávamál", Stanza 136:

> 136. "Ramt er þat tré
> er ríða skal
> ǫllom at upploki;
> baug þú gef,
> eða þat biðia mun
> þér læs hvers á liðo."'''

This stanza seems to mean "only a strong bolt can last in the door which is unbarred to everone." In other words, do not be too generous and hospitable. Óláf, it will be remembered, is not at all anxious to take Geirmund to Iceland on his ship:'''

> "'Eigi myndir þú fara á mínu skipi, ef ek hefða fyrr vitat, því at vera ætla ek þá munu nǫkkura á Íslandi, at betr gegndi, at þik sæi aldri."'''

> ("You wouldn't have been allowed to travel on my ship if I had known then, because I think there are those in Iceland that would be better off never to see you.")

He is, however, as usual, too polite to "reka þik aptr sem búrakka,"''' ("turn you away like a farm dog"). He thereupon

---

'''See footnote 57, Ch. I, p. 27.

'''Aware, perhaps that
"af illom manne
mundo aldregi
góds laun um geta."? ("Hávamál", Stanza 123.)

("No good is to be had from a bad man.")

'''Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 29, p. 78.

'''Ibid., Ch. 29, pp. 78-79.

feels obliged to invite him to stay at his home, the Icelandic view of hospitality being that once someone has wheedled his way into one's home, no matter by what dishonest means,'[1] one is compelled to be hospitable. It is as a guest in Óláf's home that Gelrmund meets and forms designs on Þuríð.

Another disastrous example of Óláf's persuadability is given when his foster-son Bolli anounces his intention of marrying Guðrún. His better judgement tells him that this is highly inadvisible:'[2]

> "'Þar er þat mál, at ek vil engan hlut at eiga; er þér, Bolli, þat í engum stað ókunnara en mér, hvert orðtak á var um kærleika með þeim Kjartani ok Guðrúnu.'"[3]
>
> ("'This is one case that I want no part of; and it is in no way more unknown to you, Bolli, what talk there was about the love between Kjartan and Guðrún.'")

Nevertheless, Óláf gives way to Bolli and supports his suit of Guðrún. From this situation arises the estrangement of the foster-brothers Bolli and Kjartan, and the resultant death of both.

Stanza 48 of the "Hávamál" characterizes Óláf particularly well:

> 48. "Mildir, frœknir
> menn bazt lifa,
> sialdan súr ala;
> en ósniallr maðr
> uggir hotvetna,
> sýtir æ glǫggr við giǫtom."

---

[1] See also the incident in Egils Saga, Ch. 33, referred to in Ch. II, pp. 50-51.
[2] "Hávamál", Stanzas 115 and 131 expressly warn against involvement with another man's woman.
[3] Ibid., Ch. 43, pp. 128-129.

("Magnanimous, valiant men live the best, they seldom nurture sorrow; but the coward fears everything, stingily begrudges giving.")

Óláf is usually ready to put the wishes of others first yet not, like Njál, to the extent that he allows himself to be publicly demeaned with impunity. Without being grasping and avaricious, qualities regarded as faults in the "Hávamál", Óláf has the shrewdness to turn unpromising situations to his own best advantage. Aware of the importance of friends, he also posesses the diplomacy to win back the friendship of those he has outwitted. While he is not insensitive enough to be entirely free from secret fears and forebodings, he never allows these to dominate him, in this respect standing in contrast to Gest, whose reluctant prescience constantly confronts him with the future, and deprives him of the opportunity to make conscious decisions freely. His conversion to Christianity , described in Chapter 103 of Njáls Saga is an example of this. Thus we see that in most cases, Óláf has the ability of a "fróðr maðr" to resolve the apparent contradictions of "Hávamál" advice, but, tragically, often takes his desire for peace too far.

It has been said that Icelandic standards of conduct were governed more by æsthetics than ethics, and if this is so, then Óláf pá surely comes nearer than most to the goal of leading an æsthetically satisfying life and, retaining a high degree of individuality, of attaining "orztírr", the fame that outlives one.'[3]

'[3]Referred to in "Hávamál", Stanza 76.

VI. CONCLUSION

As I said in my introduction, my intention has been to find out how far and in which respects selected individuals' behaviour and attitudes reflect or are reflected in the "Hávamál". My intention has not been to prove that they were deemed "fróðr" simply because they followed the advice of this Eddic poem, or that any similarities between their deeds and the stanzas of the "Hávamál" necessarily proved that they were aware of its existence.

The men discussed in the preceeding chapters all differ widely from one another. One could never confuse Njál with Egil, for example, nor Óláf pá with Snorri goði. As we have seen, they conform to the "Hávamál" to varying degrees and each in his own individual way. One might even say that they are all wise in slightly different ways. Snorri, for example, has a politician's cunning, often acting in secrecy, while Njál is knowledgeable about future events, but is powerless to avert them. Kveld-Úlf earns his description as a "fróðr maðr" through his practical good sense, and is, like Snorri, a shrewd judge of character but lacks the latter's ruthlessness in using this to manipulate others. Egil, in contrast to his grandfather, is often very incautious, but has a different (though no less valid, according to the "Hávamál") form of wisdom in his skaldic talent. Óláf pá's aversion to argument sometimes results in much more serious conflict, yet this same quality also leads to countless peaceful settlements when he is called on to

arbitrate. Nevertheless, there are some principles from the "Hávamál" that they share in common.

The first of these is the cultivation of friends, not necessarily from any personal attraction, but from sheer practical necessity. Snorri does this by forming shrewd alliances with potential enemies, treating his followers generously in a material sense and putting his legal and counselling talents at their disposal. Egil may give the impression of making enemies with impunity, but is in fact heavily reliant on the few well-chosen friends he has, owing his life and much else to Arinbjǫrn. Furthermore, although Egils Saga perhaps neglects this aspect of his life in favour of other more lively ones, Landnámabók numbers him as one of the greatest chieftains of his day, which is borne out by the great respect in which he is held in the other sagas where he appears. This suggests that the character in the saga is not a complete picture of the historical Egil, who obviously had a more responsible side to him also. As this part of his life is not of central importance to the saga, we are not told specifically how he attracts followers, apart from composing verses in their honour, but it seems reasonable to assume that he did not rise to his position of power and influence by being universally insulting: he probably hosted feasts and bestowed gifts in his career also. We know how contemptuous he was of stinginess on the part of others, and how childishly delighted he was to receive gifts, so he would have been

unlikely to be guilty himself of a vice he found so repugnant. Gest is in the habit of holding large feasts, such as the one in Njáls Saga, Chapter 103, and Óláf is also renowned for his generosity. Njál, although the only one of these men who was not a chieftain, uses the same tactics as a chieftain but on a smaller scale, giving gifts and holding feasts. All the wise men discussed here are equally generous with their useful advice and legal expertise, which increases the value of their friendship. While Njál's most memorable friendship is with Gunnar, and is based more on affection than expedience, sheer numbers of friends, allies and supporters are also of vital importance to Njál and his family at the þing (Njáls Saga, Chapters 119-123). Thus, while this by no means discounts the possibility of having friends of whom one is genuinely fond,''' having as large a number as possible of people on whom one could count, preferably influential ones, was of paramount importance for everyone in Icelandic society, not just the leaders. The qualities that evidently made a desirable friend were remarkably consistent, regardless of his position in society: generosity, hospitality, and ability to offer sound advice to extract one from difficult situations. This, as we have seen here repeatedly, is one of the major themes of the first section of the "Hávamál", around 18 of the 79 stanzas being dedicated to the importance of friends, how to win them and how to keep them.

'''See also Snorri's friendship with Guðrún in Laxdœla Saga.

Secondly, our saga sages all display skill with words. This, as we have seen, is treated at length in the "Hávamál", and has various aspects. The ability to ask and answer well, for example, leads to intelligent conversation, which is naturally important in the absence of other forms of entertainment. Furthermore, posing intelligent questions ensures that one is always well informed, and can therefore choose a course of action appropriate to the facts of one's case. For this reason, Njál has a habit of asking for news to be repeated three times, and Snorri delays making decisions until possibly relevant news can reach him.'[15] Giving good replies usually means being able to offer sound advice, which, as we have seen, is one of the main roles in society of wise men in the sagas, such as Snorri, Kveld-Úlf, Óláf pá, and numerous others not mentioned here. The ideas of wisdom and advising are, in fact, inseparable, invariably mentioned in the same breath, as these descriptions will show:

Njál:

> "...vitr var han ok forspár, heilráðr ok góðgjarn, ok varð allt at ráði þat er hann réð mǫnnum...hann leysti hvers manns vandræði, er á hans fund kom."[16]
>
> ("...he was wise and prescient, sound of advice and benevolent, and everything he advised men turned out well...he solved every man's problems that came to him.")

Snorri:

> "Hann var vitr maðr...heilráðr vinum

---

[15] Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 61.
[16] Njáls Saga, Ch. 20, p. 57.

sínum..."[18]

("He was a wise man...giving good advice to his friends...")

Besides having this ability, all the men I have discussed are also highly skilled advocates, with the exception of Egil, whose verbal talent lies in a more artistic direction. Of course, the wise man also knows when to keep silent, unlike foolish and ridiculous characters such as Laxdœla Saga's Víga Hrapp (see Ch. II, p. 51, fn. 106) or Fóstbrœðra Saga's Þorgrím (See Ch. II, p. 48, fn. 100), whose big mouths get them killed. This aspect of wisdom is another major theme in the "Hávamál", dominating 11 stanzas.

A third aspect of wisdom shared by the characters discussed is the insight that the use of physical force is not the best way of achieving one's ends, and should be a last resort. In an often violent society, this is one characteristic that distinguishes the "fróðr maðr" from his peers. I have alluded to the differing religious outlooks that may have had some influence on feelings towards the use of violence, yet cannot conclude that by itself the change of faith is sufficient explanation for the avoidance of violence on the part of the wise men. The Christian saga writers, some generations later, may possibly have fondly interpreted a character's aversion to killing as evidence of a more Christian outlook, but from the evidence of the sagas, religion seems to have had less to do with one's attitude to violence than "Hávamál" wisdom had. For example,

---

[18]Ibid., Ch. 15, p. 27.

Óláf adheres to the old religion, but never kills without extremely good reason, his only victims being the evil sorcerer Kotkel'[1] and the Þorhǫllussons,'[2] killers of his son Kjartan. On the other hand, Snorri goði, Gest and Njál all accept Christianity, but have widely different ideas on the acceptability of physical force. Gest, for example, is persuaded to convert in Chapter 103 of Njáls Saga in a manner which in itself should dispel any notion that the introduction of the new faith heralded a more peaceful age,'[3] for Gest is convinced only when a hapless berserk is torn to shreds by the mob, assisted by the power of the cross. Snorri is anxious to present a public image as a mediator, putting an end to other people's fights and settling his own differences in court rather than on the battlefield. When he deems it neccessary to do away with some enemy or rival, he goes to some trouble to conceal the fact, which is consistent with a philosophy that killing is not so much wrong as unwise. In other words, he has no scruples about killing, but prefers to avoid the possible consequences of his actions. One may suspect that his lack of physical stature, and consequent probable defeat in a *holmgang* (a particularly vicious form of viking duel), for example, had as much to do with his preference for peace as any religious scruples, despite the fact that his faith was

---

'Laxdœla Saga, Ch. 36.
'Ibid., Ch. 49.
'It should also be remembered that continental Scandinavia was "persuaded" to convert to Christianity by the "hack and hew" method.

obviously important enough to him to make him one of the pioneers of Christianity in Iceland. Njál, of whose Christianity so much has been said that it may lead to the impression that he is totally opposed to violence, in fact condones its use by his sons and Gunnar on several occasions, with less extreme provocation than that needed to incite the heathen Óláf. While it is true that he is never reported to take arms himself, it should be remembered that for the greater part of the saga Njál is an old man, and, like Snorri, rather slight of stature. This may explain why he personally doesn't join his sons in avenging Hǫskuld Njálsson, for example, for, as he says himself at the burning, he certainly has the instinct to exact vengeance for slain kinsmen, but lamentably not the capacity. Often when he cautions against killing, it is on grounds of expedience rather than morality. Thus we see that pagan and Christian alike reflected the outlook of the "Hávamál" on this very critical issue. The only exception to this is Egil, who is responsible for a number of killings, some unnecessary; however, there is no indication that his belligerent temperament is in any way connected with his heathendom, and probably has more to do with his drinking, since many of his assaults occur after several hours at the drinking table.

A fourth aspect of "Hávamál" wisdom is almost synonymous with cunning and deceit. Our wise men are implicitly unanimous (though not all to the same degree)

that the use of trickery is an excellent way to gain advantage over one's opponents and enemies. In fact, the saga writers obviously have great admiration for the man who can devise a cunning trap, and the hapless foe is described with no compassion whatever, no matter how unpleasant his fate. It is not just the characters that we might regard as rather unscrupulous, such as Snorri goði, that resort to these means, but also those we tend to see as morally more advanced. Njál's ploys, for example, include disguise, entrapment and desecration of graves as methods of obtaining evidence, which we would consider inadmissible. Nor is Óláf above recieving goods that his own brothers were cheated out of.

These, then, are four ways in which all of the "fróðir menn" discussed here conform to the "Hávamál". In addition, as the respective chapters have shown, they demonstated certain other aspects of the "Hávamál" as individuals. Significantly, these are also some of the ways in which a wise man distinguishes himself from another popular saga type, the 'hero'. While the former type is characterized by reflection, the latter is always a man of action. The 'hero', notably represented by Þórólf Kveld-Úlfsson of Egils Saga and Gunnar of Njáls Saga, tends to rely more on his own strength than on shrewdness; he is able neither to offer nor to take good advice. Although his motives often seem to be purer than those of the "fróðr maðr", the 'hero' is of less use to society, and, ultimately to himself, for his way of

life usually ends abruptly and unpleasantly. We may also note that these principles of wisdom appear in the Anglo-Saxon poetry. Here, too, we find advocated the idea of moderation in the use of force, as in many other things. Importance is attatched to verbal skills, which are linked to the idea of wisdom:

> "Frige mec frodum wordum!... "Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan."'''

> ("Sound me out with shrewd words!... Discerning people must exchange maxims.")

As there is little evidence that the characters discussed here had any knowledge of the "Hávamál", I am not suggesting that that they were consciously following the recommendations of this or any other poem. Nor can it even be inferred from these findings that the "Hávamál" was in fact the original source of these principles. On the contrary, it seems more likely that the poem arose as a reflection of the ideas of Viking society, than that people adopted these ethics because of their belief in Óðin and the sayings that were alleged to be his. The fact that they were ascribed to the highest of the gods during this period could be simply taken as evidence of the importance attached to these particular principles in that era. Many of the ideas expressed in the "Hávamál" seem to be quite independent of any religious considerations, and were retained even when Christianity replaced the paganism in which these ideas were given poetic form. We see the same situation more clearly in

---

'''"Maxims I" (quoted and translated on p. 3.).

the Anglo-Saxon gnomic poems, in which originally pagan gnomes were often included alongside Christian doctrines. Even today there are several proverbs in everyday use that embody the same basic ideas as some of the stanzas of the "Hávamál". It would seem from this that some of the wisdom of the "Hávamál" started out and has continued as folk wisdom, perhaps enjoying a transient moment of glory in which it was elevated to the status of divine wisdom.

In general, then, but not without interesting exceptions, we find that the wise men of the sagas illustrate the most important aspects of wisdom treated in the "Hávamál". Furthermore, as their adherence to "Hávamál" principles was obviously part of the reason why their contemporaries revered their wisdom, we can conclude that the concept of wisdom found in the "Hávamál" was indeed upheld by the whole of the society portrayed in the *Islendingasögur*, rather than being restricted to a few individuals.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works of Reference

Andersson, Theodore M. The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading. Cambridge, Masachussetts: Harvard University Press, 1967.

Bellows, Henry Adams, trans. The Poetic Edda. London: Oxford University Press, 1926.

Bradley, S. A. J., trans. and ed. Anglo-Saxon Poetry. London, Melbourne and Toronto: Dent, 1982.

Bredsdorff, Thomas. Kaos og Kærlighed: En Studie i Islændingasagaers Livsbillede. København: Gyldendals Uglebøger, 1971.

Cleasby, Richard, and Guðbrandur Vigfússon. A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic, 2nd ed. with supplement by William A. Craigie. Oxford: The Clarendon, 1957.

Einarsson, Stefán. A History of Icelandic Literature. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1957.

Hallberg, Peter. The Icelandic Saga, trans. Paul Schach. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962.

Helgason, Jón, ed. Eddadigte. København: Munksgaard, 1962. vols I and III.[1][2]

Hollander, Lee M., trans. The Poetic Edda. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962.

The Sagas of Kormák and The Sworn Brothers. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949.

Krapp, George Philip, and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie. The Exeter Book, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III, New York: Columbia University Press, 1961. 2nd ed.

Lönnroth, Lars. Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976.

Magnusson, Magnus, and Hermann Pálsson, trans. Laxdæla Saga. 1969; rpt. Bungay: Penguin, 1981.

Njal's Saga. 1960, rpt. Aylesbury: Penguin, 1980.

Nordal, Sigurður. Egils Saga Skallagrímssonar. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1933.[1][3]

Ólsen, Bj. M. "til Hávamál", Arkiv for Nordisk Filologi, 31 (1915), pp. 52ff.

Pálsson, Hermann, and Paul Edwards, trans. Egil's Saga. Aylesbury: Penguin, 1976.

Eyrbyggja Saga. Edinburgh: University of Toronto Press, 1973.

Schach, Paul, and Lee M. Hollander, trans. Eyrbyggja Saga. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959.

---

[1][2] I have quoted throughout from this version, as it is the current standard edition.

[1][3] I have quoted from the Íslenzk Fornrit editions of the sagas throughout as these are the current standard editions.

von See, Klaus. "Sonatorrek und Hávamál", Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum, 99 (1970) I. pp. 26-33.

Seggewiß, Hermann-Josef. Goði und Hǫfðingi: Die Literarische Darstellung und Funktion von Gode und Hauptling in den Islandersagas. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1978.

Shippey, T.A. Old English Verse. London: Hutchinson & Co, 1972.

Sijmons, B., and Hugo Gering, ed. Die Lieder der Edda. Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1927, III.

Steblin-Kaminskij, M. I. The Saga Mind, trans. Kenneth H. Ober. Odense: Odense University Press, 1973.

Sturluson, Snorri. The Prose Edda, trans. Jean Young, with Intoduction by Sigurður Nordal. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1954.

Sveinsson, Einar Ólafur. Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece, trans. and ed. Paul Schach. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971.

ed. Brennu-Njáls Saga. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1933.

ed. Laxdœla Saga. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1933.

Sveinsson, Einar Ólafur, and Matthías Þórðarson, ed. Eyrbyggja Saga. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1933.

Taylor, Paul B. and W. H. Auden, trans. The Elder Edda: A Selection. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.

Williams, Blanche Colton. Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon. New York: Columbia University Press, 1914.